

Harry Potter and the Prince of Slytherin

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Series:

Part 1 of [The Prince of Slytherin](#)

Stats:

Published: 2018-08-28 Chapters: 34/34 Words: 108645

Harry Potter and the Prince of Slytherin

by [TheSinister_Man](#)

Summary

Harry Potter was Sorted into Slytherin after a crappy childhood. His brother Jim is believed to be the BWL. Think you know this story? Think again. Year Three (Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace) starts on 9/1/16. NO romantic pairings prior to Fourth Year. Basically good Dumbledore and Weasleys. Limited bashing (mainly of James).

Notes

If you find yourself enjoying this story - and why wouldn't you - you can join other likeminded people on The Prince of Slytherin [Discord Server](#) There are perks to joining, such as a place I often frequent, and early access to the latest upcoming chapters.

AN 1: My goal with this fic is to take the bog-standard Slytherin Harry/WBWL story and subvert its traditional elements. Of course, in order to subvert those tropes, one first has to establish them, so year one basically follows the standard arc for a Slytherin Harry/WBWL story with a few deviations, leading up to some BIG deviations at the end. Year Two diverges pretty significantly from canon, and by Year Three, I don't anticipate following the canon plot at all beyond the basic plot point of Sirius getting out of jail. The novel break-down (for people who don't want to read 300,000+ words at one go) is as follows:

Chapter 1: Prologue. What you're reading now, a flashforward set at the end of Harry's Fourth Year before we go back to the beginning.

Chapter 2: Halloween 1981 and the tale of how Sirius ended up in Azkaban despite living Potters.

Chapters 3-34: Harry Potter and the Prince of Slytherin (Harry's first year).

Chapters 35-82: Harry Potter and the Secret Enemy (Harry's second year).

Chapters 83-ongoing: Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace (Harry's third year)

AN 2: Harry is relatively OC compared to canon, which, I think, is inevitable for a Slytherin Harry story. This is Harry if he learned on his 11th birthday that his parents had faked their death and dumped him with the Dursleys for contrived reasons that imply they love the WBWL more than him. The result is a Harry who's basically canon-Harry plus a certain amount of bitterness and a monomaniacal obsession with proving himself superior to his brother. He is also much smarter than canon-Harry for reasons that will be revealed later. Also, for what it's worth, Jim Potter is basically canon-Harry if he'd had two loving parents and had grown up with the privileges and responsibilities of being the Boy-Who-Lived as well as being terribly spoiled by his father and godfather (who isn't who you think it is). While he may not acquit himself well either in this chapter or the first few chapters of Year One, he is not the gibbering idiot who normally plays the role of WBWL and will undergo significant character development starting with the end of Year 1.

AN 3: I freely confess that I can't write like an 11-year-old worth a damn and at a certain point I just gave up and hand-waved it away with a magical explanation for why children this young were so well-spoken. For one thing, there is a good bit of humor as well as drama in this work, and frankly, 11-year-olds aren't generally very witty. If 11-year-olds who frequently talk like well-educated and occasionally smart-ass 14-year-olds is a complete deal-breaker for you, you should probably move along.

AN 4: Harry is the hero of this story, albeit a more reluctant one than canon. He acknowledges that he has a strong Gryffindor instinct with which he grapples from time to time. This will not be a "Dark Harry tortures everyone to death while laughing maniacally" story.

The Meeting Begins

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

HARRY POTTER AND THE PRINCE OF SLYTHERIN

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CHAPTER 1: The Meeting Begins

28 June 1995

(Seven days after Little Hangleton)

The Headmaster's Office

Harry paused at a conveniently placed mirror just across from the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the Headmaster's Office. He was already late, but as the boy was a bit cross with Professor Dumbledore at the moment, he put being presentable ahead of being punctual and so took the time to adjust his green and silver necktie and pat down the few hairs that had slipped out of place. Potter men were known for their famously unruly hair, which was one of many reason why he was glad he no longer carried that name. Satisfied with his appearance, Hadrian Remus Black ("Harry" to his friends, his teachers, and pretty much everyone else in the world except for a tiny handful of particularly officious bureaucrats) turned to the gargoyle and gave the password - "Goo-Goo Clusters," some ghastly-

sounding American confection the Headmaster had discovered – and then ascended the stairs.

"Come in, Harry," said Dumbledore from inside the office before Harry even had time to knock. The young Slytherin sighed. He'd never be so uncouth as to say anything, but privately, he'd always thought it rude for the Headmaster to always invite people in before they could actually knock, the wily old man's way of asserting dominance over visitors before they even made it inside his office. Also, it had been four days since the disastrous end of the Triwizard Tournament (they kept the original name in all papers for some silly reason despite the added participants), and only now had the Headmaster finally decided it was time to speak with him again.

"A bit lax," Harry thought, "what with a lunatic snake-man back from the dead and running around loose with an army of inbred Pureblood terrorists and all."

Not that he'd had been looking forward to this meeting. Harry had forgiven Dumbledore years before for his indirect role in placing him with the Dursleys, but the Slytherin was still continually annoyed by the Headmaster's efforts to get him back on good terms with the family he'd simultaneously been thrown out of and proudly walked away from. And thus, Harry was not surprised by the tableau before him when he opened the door.

In the center of the room was Dumbledore who for once wasn't twinkling madly at Harry but was instead looking quite somber. Indeed, today, the Headmaster actually seemed to look his age. For just a second, Harry felt almost concerned, but then he remembered he had reason to be annoyed with the man and suppressed the charitable influence.

"Bad enough the Dark Lord is back! But for him to use Dumbledore's tournament to achieve it? And with the aid of one of the Headmaster's best friends, who turned out to be a Death Eater operating right under his nose? Ridiculous! That would never have happened if Dumbledore had been a Slytherin!"

Then, annoyed with his own annoyance, Harry took a second to center himself. *"Unbridled emotion is the enemy of cunning and the foe of ambition,"* Slytherin's memoirs had said, and they were words Harry had tried to live by pretty much since the day he first read them. If he did embroidery, the quote would be hanging over his bed in framed needlepoint. In any case, Voldemort's rise made Harry and Dumbledore into allies whatever their past conflicts.

To Dumbledore's right was an empty chair apparently meant for him. Sitting next to it were two figures Harry was pleased to see: Severus Snape and Sirius Black. Snape, of course, was Harry's Head of House. After a rough introduction, Harry and the Potions Master settled into a truce that eventually blossomed into a relatively warm (for Slytherins, anyway) mentor-apprentice relationship. Lord Black, pale and gaunt, still showed the signs of years of false imprisonment in Azkaban, but that didn't stop him from adopting Harry as his Heir to the shock and horror of most of Wizarding Britain. Harry thought his role in successfully springing Sirius out of Azkaban and into a Lordship was one of his greatest achievements, exceeded only by the monumental task of getting Snape and Black past their adolescent hatred and into an uneasy alliance. It helped that the three of them had mutual enemies.

Speaking of whom, to the left of the Headmaster's desk sat the Potters – James, Lily, and their son, James Jr. (Jim to his

friends, the Boy-Who-Lived to his adoring public, the Supreme Git of the Universe according to the T-shirt Harry had sent to him for his 13th birthday). Ostensibly Harry's identical twin, the two could easily be told apart by Jim's atrocious hair, his relentlessly Gryffindorish attitude towards life, and the small jagged scar on his left temple that resembled the letter V. Harry had a scar of his own, of course, but one which was generally attributed to falling masonry, a lightning bolt having no apparent connection to the Dark Lord. Or so most people thought – Harry's Ancient Runes professor knew perfectly well that the lightning bolt scar couldn't have been a better representation of Sowilo, the Norse rune of power and victory, if somebody carved it deliberately, but being as cunning as any Slytherin herself, she had hoarded that information, knowledge being power after all.

As Harry entered, the Potter father and son turned to look at him with angry glares as characteristic as they were predictable. "*Honestly*," he thought. "*It's not my fault they both kept trusting the wrong people.*" Lily Potter didn't glare at her eldest son, but Harry avoided eye contact with her nonetheless. The reasons for the gulf between her and Harry were very different from those separating Harry from his former father and brother, but they were perhaps even more insurmountable.

"You're late," said James coolly.

"Am I?" Harry replied cheerfully as he took the empty seat. "Actually, I don't recall being given a specific time to be here. Just instructions to come as soon as possible. I waited until Theo had left for Grimmauld Place and then came straightaway."

"That's no excu-!"

"Yes, thank you, Lord Potter," Harry said even more cheerfully and with the smile he usually reserved for people he thought were too thick for subtlety. "Your observations have been noted. I will endeavor to be more punctual in the future." Then, he turned to the Headmaster while his birth-father fumed. "Happily, I'm here now. Headmaster?"

Dumbledore was uncharacteristically silent for several seconds. Harry crooked an eyebrow. Finally, he spoke. "Before we get to that, tell me - how is young Theo doing?"

Harry's smile faltered for a second before reasserting itself. The school's treatment of Theo had been a ... sore topic with him for some time. While that wasn't Dumbledore's fault, he certainly didn't do much to help.

"Theo *No-Name* is doing as well as can be expected, sir. I don't know if Sirius has told you, but assuming the legal issues can be worked out, he'll be formally adopting him as Theo Black. Which I think is excellent, because frankly, I've always wanted a brother." Harry fought down the temptation to sneer at Jim with that last dig. After all, he'd been on a campaign for some time now to get all the other Slytherins to sneer less often. Anyway, it was a lie - like Neville Longbottom, Theo had already been his brother in every way that mattered for years. Of course, there was that brief interval when Harry actually thought that he and Jim ... but no, that was over and there was no sense brooding over it.

Jim snorted. "You snakes deserve each other," he muttered. "You can get matching Dark Marks."

Harry rolled his eyes. Apparently, the other boy was still upset at what happened in the graveyard at Little Hangleton, even though Harry's Slytherin cunning had

saved both their lives after Jim's Gryffindor hero complex had once again led them into disaster. Typical, really. Sirius growled audibly in response to Jim's dig, and James tensed in response. Luckily, before the wands came out, Dumbledore snapped.

"Enough! All of you! The time for this dissension is past. The Dark Lord has returned, a fact the Ministry of Magic refuses to acknowledge. Voldemort is drawing his Death Eaters to his side even as we speak. Things ... things have *changed*." Dumbledore's voice broke on that last word, surprising everyone present who had always considered the Headmaster a monument of self-control. "As part of that, Jim, you will cease this constant badgering of your brother and of the other Slytherins. While it is true that Slytherin House has always had strong ties to the Dark Lord in the past, I cannot deny what Harry has done to persuade many of his house-mates and even their families to reject Voldemort now. And I will not have those fragile alliances undermined by the bigotries of House Potter that I have tolerated for too long!"

Jim shrank into his seat, as did his father. His outburst over, Dumbledore seemed to deflate as his anger faded. For his part, Harry's eyes widened. He'd never seen Dumbledore talk that way to the Boy-Who-Lived before.

"Now then, before we get to the primary purpose of this meeting, I'd first like to discuss the current attitudes of the DMLE and the Wizengamot towards the announcement of Voldemort's return. We ... we may not have an opportunity to speak of such things later." Black and Potter Sr. looked at each other coolly before Sirius nodded at his former friend. James turned back to Dumbledore and started his report on the state of the DMLE. Harry leaned back into his chair.

"*Things have changed*," Dumbledore had said. Harry looked over to the three people who were supposed to have been his family. But somehow, they were never quite up to the job, so he finally gave up on them and went out to find a family of his own. "*Some things would never change*." As his birth-father's voice droned on in the background, Harry thought about the choices – some his own, most made by others – that had brought him here.

Chapter End Notes

AN 6: The firstborn child of a Wizengamot Lord is deemed the Heir Presumptive as soon as he or she demonstrates accidental magic. The Heir Presumptive is elevated to Heir Apparent upon passing a certain number of OWLs or otherwise demonstrating competency as a wizard. These two statuses confer certain legal benefits on the Heir which can protect the Heir even against mistreatment by his parents (benefits which Harry will use to protect himself from a father who would much rather have the second son as his heir). For example, while James Potter desires to disinherit Harry in favor of Jim, he lost the legal right to do so the second Harry's Hogwarts letter was generated. I am aware that these terms have different meanings for Muggle nobility, but this is what they mean for wizards. Please do not leave me angry reviews or messages because I say Heir Presumptive when you think it should be Heir Apparent.

AN 7: No romantic pairings among minor children before Year 4 at the earliest. No slash for Harry, but

there will likely be at least one gay character, possibly more, among Harry's peer group. Deal with it.

AN 8: The first few chapters were me finding my way as a writer and, admittedly, are a little rough. I've edited Chapter 1 and may come back and edit some later chapters when time permits. That said, I feel that I found my "voice" sometime around the Halloween 1991 arc (Chapters 11-14). If you read that far and still hate it, you probably won't like it any better by Chapter 50 or Chapter 100.

Halloween 1981

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

CHAPTER 1: HALLOWEEN 1981

31 October 1981

Peter Pettigrew slowly picked himself up off the ground and surveyed the wreckage of the Potter home in amazement. He had sworn allegiance to Voldemort just a week before, bartering the secret James and Lily Potter had entrusted to him in exchange for a seat high in the Dark Lord's counsel. Voldemort had chosen tonight as the most auspicious time to kill the Potters and the Prophecy Child they protected, and he'd insisted that Peter accompany him to Godric's Hollow. The traitor remained across the street and watched as his master glided through the wards on Godric's Hollow and forced his way inside. There was a brief flurry of spellfire, and then silence that last for a moment or two ... until a titanic explosion blew away part of the second floor with enough force to knock Peter to the ground. After recovering from both surprise and the loud ringing in his ears, Peter closed his eyes and concentrated. There was a soft pop, and then a Norwegian Brown rat appeared in his place and quickly darted across to the Potter home. Once inside, Peter resumed his human form and began his investigation. To his great surprise, he soon discovered first James and then Lily Potter, both stupified, along with two infant children. It was decidedly unlike Voldemort to use a Stunning Hex rather than a Killing Curse, but Peter assumed his master had his reasons. Of

the Dark Lord, there was nothing left but a pile of ragged clothing and a wand on the floor of the second floor nursery. Peter pocketed the wand inside his robes. The animagus descended the stairs and sat down on a loveseat near the prone body of his former friend, James Potter, muttering curses as he went.

"Typical!" he thought. "I finally commit myself to the Death Eaters fully and Voldemort immediately gets himself blown up! So now what do I do?" Peter sniggered softly to himself. *"I suppose I could turn into a rat full time. Find some wizarding child that needs a pet or something. At least I'd stay fed and out of Azkaban."* He shook his head to clear it and then closed his eyes in concentration. Then, he looked down at James's prone body and smiled.

The decision to switch Secret Keepers from Sirius to Peter had only been made just a fortnight before, and James had been insistent that no one know about the switch, not even Dumbledore. If they'd truly kept the switch hidden, he might have the chance to have his cake and eat it too. Peter cracked his knuckles as he studied James intently. Then, he reached into a pocket and pulled out a small box which he placed on the coffee table. He tapped it once with his wand, and it grew to its normal size - a wooden chest about foot across. From inside, the traitor removed a small vial containing a purple liquid that had been gifted to him by a fellow Death Eater who called himself Mr. Nemo. Peter smiled again. Most of the Death Eaters with whom he'd become acquainted could charitably be described as psychotic morons. Mr. Nemo, like Mr. Toymaker and Miss Direction, were also quite mad but *decidedly not* morons.

Peter carried the vial over to James' prone body and pried his mouth open before pouring a few drops of the purple fluid down his throat. Then, he pressed his wand to James'

temple. The aurors knew ways of detecting memory-altering charms inflicted upon their own, but Mr. Nemo had assured Peter that any mind-altering spell cast in conjunction with his little miracle potion would be undetectable ... and irreversible.

"**OBLIVIATE**. You will forget that you switched Secret Keepers. You will forget that you ever considered it. You will forget any memory suggesting that anyone other than Sirius Black was your Secret Keeper." Satisfied that the spell had taken hold, he then cast a second spell.

"**CONFUNDUS**. You will hate Sirius for what he has done and want revenge more than anything in the world."

Peter repeated the Obliviate spell on Lily after giving her a dose of Nemo's potion as well. Then, he looked up and around, his nose twitching uncontrollably as he did. His animagus form gave him a keen sense of danger, and so he was able to hear the approach of Sirius Black's flying motorbike long before he saw it. "No time for the Confundus then, Lily. But I'm sure James will be vindictive enough for the both of you. He always has been in the past." Peter took cover and tried to take out Black with a stunner, but the other Marauder dodged it.

"Wormtail! You backstabbing little vermin! How could you do this!"

Knowing he couldn't take a seasoned auror in a fair fight, Peter yelled out from his hiding spot. "The Potters are all dead, Sirius, all of them! And you're next! Catch me if you can, blood traitor! And by the way, I ALWAYS HATED THAT NAME!" Then, with a pop, he apparated away, confident that the ever-predictable Sirius Black would follow in a rage rather than taking the time to learn how he'd been deceived ... and framed.

November 1, 1981

"Albus? What happened? How did we even survive?" asked Lily from her bed at St. Mungo's.

"I'm not certain, my dear, but ... I think ..." Dumbledore seemed confused for a moment. Then, he looked up as the door opened, and a nurse pushed a double stroller into the hospital room. His attention was drawn to the sound of an infant's wailing. Peering into the stroller, he noticed two infants, one crying and the other asleep. The bawling child wore baby's pajamas in Gryffindor red, with the name Jim embroidered on the front. As he looked down at the crying babe, with a still fading V-scar on his temple, Albus relaxed and smiled. "Yes, I do believe that we have little Jim to thank for this."

"... Jim?" said Lily in confusion before her maternal instincts kicked in and she rushed over to pick up her crying son. "Shh, Jim. It's alright. Mummy's here."

"Albus, what are you talking about?" asked a dazed James Potter, who had been resting in the bed next to his wife.

"Well, I am quite certain that the mark on Jim's head is a curse scar, the result of a backlash from Voldemort's attempt to slay him. It is clear now that Jim was the child spoken of in the prophecy which named a child born as the seventh month dies and who Voldemort would mark as his equal. Harry was born first at 11:52, while Jim was born just before the stroke of midnight. And now, Jim is marked with a V for Voldemort!"

"Our Jim did it?" said James in wonder. "It's ... a miracle!"

And while the three adults marveled over the child who would soon be known as "The Boy-Who-Lived," they ignored the other child sleeping peacefully in the stroller wearing identical pajamas save for the name "Harry" instead of "Jim." And on his brow, a rune of power pulsed with magical energies that none of them noticed.

November 3, 1981

Peter Pettigrew made his way casually through the crowded London street, occasionally looking around nervously. He'd seen the Grim out of the corner of his eye a few times and knew Sirius was waiting until the Muggle crowd was thinner. Suddenly, he heard movement behind him, and the animagus turned quickly and darted down a narrow alley. He'd only made it halfway when a voice like cut glass sliced through the night.

"It's over, Peter! I've got you now!"

Peter turned to face his pursuer, drawing his wand slowly as he did. "Traitor, Sirius? You'd know all about being a traitor, don't you?"

"What's that, Wormtail? Do you want to make some pitiful excuse for why you did what you did?" Sirius's wand was fixed on Peter, and Black had a murderous look in his eyes.

"I have no excuses for you, Death Eater!" shouted Peter, defiantly.

"What?! What the hell are you..." Whatever Sirius Black had meant to say was interrupted as a voice behind him yelled out "**EXPELLIARUMUS!**" and his wand flew out of his hand. Whirling quickly, he was shocked when James Potter whipped off his invisibility cloak to catch Black's wand easily

with his off hand. Sirius's shock and relief that his friend was still alive was quickly replaced by concern over the look in James's eye, a look of absolute hatred. "Prongs?" he said in surprise. Then, Pettigrew's Body-Bind Hex slammed into his exposed back. Sirius's arms and legs slammed together, and he fell to the ground.

Paralyzed, Sirius could only watch in silent horror as his best friend walked up to his prone body wearing the same look of hatred and contempt he'd worn back in school when they were dancing with Snivellus. "You thought you could betray us - *betray me* - the way you did and get away with it, *Secret Keeper*." With a snarl, he kicked the helpless Black in the ribs. The paralyzed Black made no sound, but his pain was still obvious.

"Aah! Dammit James, I wasn't your Secret Keeper! Peter was!" he thought desperately, but no words came. Nearby, there were soft pops as aurors apparated into the area to ward off any curious Muggles.

"Thank you for helping to catch him, Peter. Although I do wonder why he was so bent on killing you instead of just fleeing the country."

"No idea ... unless. He yelled out that I was a traitor. You know, Dumbledore may have known he was the Secret Keeper, but only the three of us and Lily were there when you cast the spell. Perhaps he thought that You-Know-Who had killed both of you. If he killed me as well, he could have claimed that you'd switched Secret Keepers. Merlin, what a sly bastard!"

Wormtail looked down at Sirius, seemingly disgusted with him, but his eyes were almost dancing with mirth. Despite himself, Sirius almost had to hand it to the other Marauder.

He never imagined that Peter Pettigrew could be this ... cunning. Where had he been hiding it all these years?!

"So now that you've caught him, James, what are you going to do with him?"

"As tempting as the Killing Curse is right now, I'll let our wonderful judicial system handle him."

"James!" exclaimed Peter. "You're going to trust the Wizengamot to decide his fate? He's the Black Heir! And now that he's exposed as a blood purist, they'll be spendthrift in winning his freedom!"

"What do you want me to do?" hissed James. "Use the Killing Curse on him in front of a half-dozen aurors?"

Peter stepped closer and whispered urgently. "You're an auror yourself, James. I know you have a license to kill Death Eaters."

James stared at him for a second. Sirius's eyes almost bulged out of his head. Potter was considering it! Suddenly, James whipped his wand, and Sirius's sleeves ripped away. James sighed loudly.

"I have a license to kill marked Death Eaters, Peter. Obviously, he hasn't been marked yet." Peter looked frustrated, while James stared down at his (former) friend intensely. "Still, there are other Death Eater Laws on the books. In circumstances involving high ranking Death Eaters, we're allowed secret trials. Hell, even trials in absentia. Between my sworn testimony, Lily's, and yours, we'll have this bastard in Azkaban by tomorrow night."

"James," Peter said hesitantly, "I was happy, honored even, to help you catch Sirius. But I'm not an auror. I don't have a

heavily warded estate. And I don't want to be looking over my shoulder for Death Eaters for the rest of my life. Do you really need oath-bound testimony from me against the Black Heir?"

James smiled fondly. "No, I guess not. Lily and I can handle it. I will need a statement from you about what happened between you here tonight just to complete the auror report, but I'll have it sealed." He put his hand on Peter's shoulder. "You've been a true friend tonight, better than I've deserved from you. I know I didn't always treat you right when we were at school, but I promise I'll make it up to you from now on." James turned to the other aurors. "Alright, gentlemen. I want this bastard stupified, bound, silenced and locked up in the deepest, dankest Ministry holding cell you can find. No one talks to him and no one knows where he is until after he's sentenced. Got it?"

As a chorus of "yessirs" rang out in the night, the still-paralyzed Sirius Black looked up into the face of Peter Pettigrew. It bore an expression of absolute victory it, and for the next twelve years, it would be the first image he saw at night when the Dementors came.

Chapter End Notes

AN 1: Sirius will not reappear prior to Year 3. Neither will Lupin, for anyone who's curious about that. Peter will return by the end of Year 1. This is not the Peter Pettigrew that you think you know.

The Reunion

CHAPTER 3: THE REUNION

25 July 1991

"So ... I'm a wizard," said Harry slowly.

"Yes, Harry."

"And ... you're ... my da...my father?"

"Yes," said James with a tight smile.

"So, where is ... my mother?"

"She's already at Hogwarts. She's the new Professor for Muggle Studies and is still in the process of getting her class situated. I mean, she wanted to be here..." James's voice faded away lamely.

Harry never looked up from the bowl of ice cream sitting in front of him. He had barely spoken to his father since the man arrived that morning the Dursley residence to announce that neither he nor his wife were dead, that both he and his wife were wizards, and that Harry was a wizard too who would soon be starting at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry along with a twin brother he'd never heard of before. James had been shocked and outraged to learn that the Dursley's had told Harry that he and Lily were dead and that he knew nothing of the wizarding world. His furious comments were cut short by Petunia's vicious response: *"He'd have learned the truth years ago if his parents had loved him enough to visit even*

once!" Of course, it had been Petunia who had demanded that he and Lily stay away from the Dursleys when Harry was assumed to be a squib, but Petunia was supposed to contact the Potters at once if he showed any signs of magic, which he apparently had. That didn't make the Muggle's hateful insult hurt any less though.

And now, James Potter was nervously watching his eldest son, who looked so much smaller and frailer than his twin brother. Between them sat a bowl of Fortescue's ice cream that the boy hadn't touched yet. He just stared at it intensely because the alternative was looking at the father who'd abandoned him. After several seconds, the boy asked the question James had been dreading ever since he'd learned that his firstborn son was a wizard after all.

"Why?"

James swallowed. "It ... was necessary. Your brother, Jim, is ... special. He was chosen by prophecy to destroy a powerful evil wizard. We don't say his name, just ... You-Know-Who. Anyway, Jim destroyed You-Know-Who, saving all our lives in the process. He even resisted the Killing Curse, which everyone thought was impossible. They call Jim 'the Boy-Who-Lived,' and he can hardly walk down the street without people bowing and scraping before him. We were concerned that you might feel jealous of him. The magical healers were all certain that you were a squib. That is, someone born to wizards but with no magic of their own. As a squib, you'd have been a target for You-Know-Who's followers and wouldn't be able to protect yourself. So Dumbledore - he's the Headmaster at Hogwarts and the leader of the opposition to You-Know-Who - he suggested that we send you to live with your aunt and uncle so you could become accustomed to living in the Muggle world. We

didn't even think you were a wizard until the school generated an invitation letter for you."

"My letter. Right. Do you happen to notice the address?" Harry asked in a curious tone of voice.

James blinked several times at the seemingly odd question. "Not particularly. I knew where you lived anyway. Number 4, Privet Drive in Surrey. Why?"

Harry ignored him. "So what happens now? Will I be moving in with you or going back to the Dursley's when I'm not in school?"

James sighed. "Dumbledore has put a lot of magical wards at the Dursley residence to keep your presence there a secret, so you can't be kidnapped and used against Jim. You really are safer there at least until you graduate and can defend yourself. But I promise you that once things have settled down, we'll have you over to visit so that we can all get reacquainted."

Finally, Harry lifted his head and looked his father straight in the eye, and for a second, James flinched. He'd always thought that Harry had his mother's eyes. But now, he realized that Harry's were brighter and more vivid. They were, in fact, the exact same color as the Killing Curse.

"Harry Potter. ***The Cupboard Under The Stairs***. 4 Privet Drive. Surrey. Are you really sending me back to the Dursleys so they can lock me in *the boot cupboard again*?"

James' mouth opened and closed like a fish. He had felt quite certain that Harry had been mistreated at the Dursley's simply from the number of times Petunia had screamed the word "freak" at him in the fifteen minutes he'd been there. *But a boot cupboard?!*

"Harry, I'm ... Merlin, I'm so sorry. I promise you. We'll speak to them. We'll make sure they treat you better from now on."

Harry was silent for a moment. Then, he slid his untouched bowl of ice cream towards the middle of the table. "I'm done eating. We should go buy my school supplies now." Then, he stood and walked towards the exit without looking back.

At Madam Malkin's (where James insisted on buying him a whole new wardrobe), Harry met an exuberant red-headed boy who couldn't stop talking about how he had to get into Gryffindor because that was where all of his brothers were and that was where the Boy-Who-Lived was sure to be sorted. The fact that he was standing next to someone who looked like a slightly smaller version of the famous Boy-Who-Lived was completely lost on him in his excitement. Harry grunted a response and left without getting the boy's name.

At Ollivander's, after dozens of failed efforts, the old man finally fitted Harry with a holly and phoenix feather wand which Ollivander described as "curious."

"I'm not surprised," the boy interrupted, eager to get the day over with. "It is a magic wand. I reckon that's a 'curious' as you can get. Is there anything you recommend to go with it?" And that was how Harry left the store with a polishing kit, a wrist-holder and a book on wand lore.

At Flourish & Botts, James Potter told Harry to get whatever he wanted and charge it to his account while he ran a quick errand at Gringotts for the Headmaster. So Harry bought every book on the school list, plus every book that the store owner recommended that might conceivably

help a Muggle-raised student adapt to Hogwarts. He also bought every single book mentioning the Boy-Who-Lived that looked even halfway reliable.

At Eeylops Owl Emporium, James insisted that Harry get an owl. "That way, you can stay in touch with us next summer while you're at the Dursleys," said James. Harry just looked at him. Finally, he relented and picked out a rather beautiful snowy owl. Then, he asked to return to Flourish & Botts so he could set up an owl-post account in case he needed more books later. As they were leaving, Harry asked if it were possible for wizards to talk with their owls or with any other animals.

"Generally no," he replied. "The only animals a wizard can talk with are snakes. It's an ability called Parseltongue. And only people called Parselmouths can do it. It's a sign of being a Dark wizard. You-Know-Who was a Parselmouth."

"*Well*," said Harry quietly, thinking back to his recent trip to the zoo and the conversation he'd had with a boa constrictor. "*That's good to know*."

From there, James purchased Harry a new trunk and set him up with an allowance of ten galleons a week, which was apparently an extravagant sum and which would magically refill into the "bigger-on-the-inside" mokeskin pouch which James also purchased for him.

Later, back at Privat Drive, James had a long talk with the Dursleys during which quite a few threats were made. Apparently, the Potters had been paying Vernon and Petunia to look after Harry all these years, and if they weren't going to take reasonable care of the boy, then they'd be paying that money back ... as well as moving out of their home, for which apparently the Potters had paid the

mortgage. Accordingly, Harry would be moving out of his cupboard and into what had been Cousin Dudley's spare room. Also, there would be no more chores for Harry, which was good news as he planned to a lot of time reading the books he'd purchased.

Finally, as he was leaving, James asked Harry to come out to the front porch for a good-bye. "Listen, son. I ... I can't tell you how sorry I am about all this. We should have checked in on you before now. We shouldn't have just trusted Petunia and Vernon to do right by you. But I promise, you. We'll get past this and come back together as a family."

Harry stared that unsettling stare again. "Do you really believe that?"

"You bet, kiddo."

Harry was silent for a few seconds before replying. "They told me you were both dead. That you were a drunk and were always on the dole. That my mother sold herself to pay for drugs for the both of you. That you killed yourself and mother while you were both drunk and high in an auto accident that I barely survived."

James looked up at the door to 4 Privet Drive as if he could burn a hole through it with the power of his angry gaze.

"Those were lies, Harry. Filthy awful lies."

"I know. I've always known that they were lying to me about my mother and father. But I never *imagined* that one day I'd wish it had been the truth."

And with that, Harry turned and went inside, slamming the door in his father's face.

Meet the Potters

CHAPTER FOUR: Meet the Potters

1 September 1991

Harry Potter had never considered himself particularly smart, and certainly no one he'd met in his entire life had even suggested that he might be. There had been one letter sent home to the Dursley's in his third year of schooling that indicated he was smart based on a test he'd taken at school and which had been graded by some education officials in London. But his guardians had been convinced that he'd cheated somehow, that a *freak* like him couldn't possibly be ... *gifted*. So they locked him in his cupboard for a week and let him eat nothing but stale bread and water. When he went back to school, his teacher told the whole class that he'd admitted to his guardians that he'd cheated on the IQ test they'd all taken and that he was an awful, terrible child. And then, her hair turned blue for some reason. Magic, he now suspected.

After that, Harry set for himself the goal of always doing *slightly* worse than Dudley in every class, a goal at which he succeeded admirably, though considering Dudley's poor academic skills, Harry had been lucky to have never been transferred to a special needs class. Once, he made it a point of getting every question on an exam correct and then leaving the last seven questions blank just to see if the teacher said anything. She didn't.

In short, Harry Potter learned early and well to never apply himself academically, a lesson which lasted right up until the day he met James Potter. It was like a dam cracking and

then shattering, unleashing thoughts the boy had been burying since he was old enough to talk. The first night in his new room, he set himself to studying his new textbooks, starting with Potions. He was a remarkably good cook for an eleven-year-old (surprising the skills one picks up when the alternative is a frying pan flung at one's head), and he thought the principles should be similar. When he first came to a word he didn't understand ("*What on Earth is a bezoar?*"), he crept downstairs and claimed the Oxford English Dictionary which Aunt Marge had gifted to Dudley but which had never once been opened, and then he wrote the word and its meaning down in a spiral notebook leftover from the previous year of schooling. He started reading the book just after dinner and was surprised when he finally yawned, looked at his watch, and realized it was after midnight. He'd covered six chapters and filled three pages of his notebook. It was more homework than he'd done in his life.

Some people might have mistaken Harry's newfound studiousness for a desire to please the parents who had finally returned for him. Those people would be wrong. Harry had decided that he would excel in order to force his parents to acknowledge what a mistake they had made by tossing him aside, whatever it took. For ten years, the boy had been forced to accept his miserable lot in life as well as the vital need to keep his emotions in check at all costs. *Nothing good ever came of getting angry at the way he'd been treated.* But now, perhaps for the first time in his life, Harry Potter was angry. Absolutely and unreservedly angry. And it was an anger that burned cold.

For the entire month of August, Harry spent nearly every waking moment poring over the books he'd purchased at Flourish & Botts. He ate sparsely and always in his room, leaving the Dursleys to learn to their disappointment just

how bad a cook Petunia was. Mornings were for magic, though just theory and history for now. It was apparently illegal for him to practice actual spells at home prior to the start of school, and while James implied with a wink that the Ministry turned a blind eye to minor spell-casting by pre-First Years, Harry was taking no chances. Afternoons were for etiquette and politics as he struggled to learn the nuances of the odd and insular culture he was about to join. Evenings were for whatever topics had left him with the most questions during the day, plus time spent practicing with a quill which was an entirely new but apparently vital skill to master. Finally, he spent from thirty minutes before bed practicing with his wand holster in front of a mirror, because the first time he'd tried to release the wand from its holster, he'd dropped it onto the floor, and if he did that in front of fellow students, it would be too embarrassing for words.

It was in the second week of studying wizarding politics that he finally came across the law which had actually required James Potter, *under threat of jail time no less*, to inform his firstborn son of his wizarding heritage and see to his education. After an owl exchange with the clerk at Flourish & Botts, Harry added **Hutchinson's Commentary on Wizengamot Inheritance Law** to his growing library. Luckily, his trunk had the best (and most expensive) expansion charms available on it. In a pinch, it even had a small room he could sleep in, although the idea of that reminded him too much of his cupboard for it to ever be comfortable.

On weekends, he would take a break by spending a few hours walking in a nearby park. Late on the second Sunday, he finally found what he was looking for: a small garden snake who, when addressed, hesitantly responded to Harry's voice in what sounded oddly like a Cockney accent.

The snake, after expressing surprise at the sudden realization that it now had a name, introduced itself as ... Bob. And while Bob was not terribly knowledgeable about magic, he was somehow aware that Harry was "a Speaker," that Speakers were incredibly rare, and that no other snake known to Bob had ever met one. How Bob intuitively knew what other snakes he'd encountered remembered about a particular subject was a mystery even to Bob.

Even more strangely, Bob also indicated that he was only able to know these things while Harry talked with him or otherwise remained aware of him. Apparently, the moment a Parselmouth stopped regarding a particular snake as being worthy of attention, it went back to being a "normal" snake, though if the Speaker addressed it again later, it suddenly remembered everything that had happened in the meantime. But, if Harry actually assigned Bob some sort of task - like "watch over the park for a particular person" or even "go find other snakes and bring them here" - Bob could carry it out to completion, even following relatively complicated tasks in the process, only to revert to mundane "snakiness" when he was done. Strangest of all, the magic that powered Parseltongue seemed to be *contagious*. Bob could, if ordered to by Harry, go find other snakes and convey Harry's orders to them, which those snakes could then execute with at least as much intelligence and self-awareness as Bob himself had while under Harry's power.

The boy made a mental note of these findings but never committed them to paper, as it was clear from James's comments that Parselmouths were held in great disregard. Mainly, it seemed that this was because "You-Know-Who" was well-known for his Parseltongue abilities. Actually, Harry did not "Know-Who" and said so, but James explained that there was a powerful cultural taboo against speaking aloud the name of "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named." After

much prodding, James finally whispered that it was "Voldemort" but advised Harry never to say it aloud in polite company or even to write it down. And so, like his Parseltongue observations, Harry did not add the Dark Lord's name to his ever-growing stack of journals. By the end of August, Harry had filled three spiral-bound notebooks with his notes and questions about the Wizarding World, plus a fourth notebook just for calligraphy practice. He had no idea how wizards had gone so long without discovering the refillable ink pen, but he wasn't going to be the one to introduce the concept to them.

On the morning of September 1st, the Potters came by bright and early to pick Harry up from 4 Privet Drive, and he finally got to meet both Lily Potter and the Boy-Who-Lived. The latter was like looking into a fun-house mirror. Jim Potter was obviously Harry's twin, but he still stood almost three inches taller and weighed a stone heavier, most of it muscle. *"Obviously, **someone** hasn't been half-starved for the past ten years,"* Harry thought ruefully to himself.

Nevertheless, Harry was polite to his sibling and his mother, the latter of whom looked distinctly worried upon meeting her son. And the *look* that passed between Lily and Petunia! Harry would have been amused if he didn't dislike both women so much. Together, the Potters moved out to a rather fancy limo parked in front of 4 Privet Drive (complete with a driver – Harry knew the Potters were quite wealthy, but he was a bit surprised at how eager they were to show it) with James carrying Harry's trunk and owl cage. As per the advice of the owl salesman, Harry had sent his owl on ahead that morning. She would be waiting at Hogwarts in the owlery. After toying with "Nemesis," "Avenger," and "Death Talon," he had finally named the owl "Hedwig." He told James he had found in a book and

thought it "sounded cool." Hedwig was, in fact, the patron saint of orphans.

In the limo, Lily looked over at Harry and started to speak, but the boy interrupted her. "Look, the last time I met with ... Dad, I was upset, and I said some things that probably upset him, and you if he repeated them. But ... I want to go to Hogwarts and learn magic. I want to look forward to the day I never set foot on Privet Drive again. And if that means letting bygones be bygones and trying to be a part of the Potter family, then that's just what I'll do." And with those words, Harry smiled as earnestly as he possibly could, so much so that a slight soreness crept into his cheek muscles. He felt certain that the Potters would recoil from such insincerity, but they all smiled back at him warmly. Apparently, they were that desperate to believe that he could forgive them so easily. Or perhaps, they were just thick.

Jim reached over and punched Harry in the arm playfully. "That's great, Har. And listen, Dad told us that the Dursley's may not have treated you very well. But I promise, it was no picnic for me either. I've had to go through special training since I was eight to get me ready for Hogwarts in case any Death Eaters came after me. And I've had to deal with obnoxious fans always after my autograph. We've all had our problems to deal with."

The ache generated by Harry's smile became almost excruciating at that, but he took a deep breath and exhaled. "That's a very good point... Jim. It must have been ... very rough for you." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lily look suspiciously towards her husband, who swallowed nervously. Harry assumed he'd underplayed the extent of the Dursley's abuse to Jim, and maybe to Lily as well.

"Anyway," continued Jim. "Once we get to Hogwarts and get sorted into Gryffindor, I'll be there to look out for you and help you fit in. Everyone will love you once they find out you're the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived." He actually puffed out his chest at that.

"Jim!" sighed Lily. Apparently she had tried to keep Jim's ego in check, but unsuccessfully. James, of course, was delighted at the thought of his twin sons following in his footsteps.

"Ha ha! Two Potters in Gryffindor at once! Filch will have a coronary!"

Harry chuckled but then turned serious. "Well, I sure hope so. But ... like it or not, Jim and I have led very different lives even though we're twins. I hope you won't be upset with me if I don't make it into Gryffindor."

"Not at all, Harry," said Lily firmly. "All the houses have their good points. *Right, James?*"

"Alright, alright. Harry, I promise you that no matter what house you get into, we will still love you, and Jim will still look after you."

Harry sighed as if relaxing. "I'm glad. And for what it's worth, Jim. I'll do my best to look after you as well." The other three chuckled warmly, while Harry readied the knife. "After all, *I am the Heir.*"

Jim blinked a few times. "Sorry? What?"

Harry looked around as if afraid he'd made a faux pas. Lily seemed surprised, while James looked like he'd just swallowed a lemon. "I'm sorry," said Harry uncertainly. "I've been cramming books on wizarding culture so I'll fit in

better – don't want to make a fool of myself in front of someone from an important family, you know – and there was a chapter that discussed the Wizengamot. It said that because I was the firstborn wizarding child, I was automatically the Heir Presumptive for House Potter. Did I get that bit wrong?"

He hadn't, of course. His copy of **Hutchinson's** devoted almost 300 pages to discussing the Wizengamot, the families who ruled it, and the thousand-year-old laws governing succession to a seat in it, particularly to an Ancient and Noble Seat like that of the Potters. Harry was first born, and indisputably a wizard. Ergo, he was automatically the Heir Presumptive for House Potter and would be elevated to Heir Apparent once he'd come of age and passed enough OWLs. Before then, James could theoretically disinherit him personally from any assets that were his and not entailed to the family and maybe deprive him of spending money during his Hogwarts years. But his education and living expenses were paid for through graduation plus a mastery if he wanted it, and at seventeen, he was guaranteed a sizeable monthly stipend from the family trust for life. *And*, he was guaranteed the Potter Seat and all the entailed properties and assets someday provided he outlived James and avoided a surprisingly short list of sins that legally justified disinheriting an Heir. Even a felony conviction couldn't deprive him of protected status unless the sentence exceeded five years.

Lily and Jim, neither of whom seemed to know about such things, just looked back and forth between James and Harry inquisitively, as James hesitantly admitted the truth. "Yes, Harry. You are the oldest so technically that makes you the Heir Presumptive. Honestly, I hadn't give it much thought. I hope to live to a ripe old age before I have to worry about turning things over to an heir, after all."

"Oh, I do too, Dad," said Harry cheerfully. Then, he turned to his brother. "From what I read, it seems like the Wizengamot is kinda boring. I bet your happy that you have an older brother who can take care of all it – business management, estate planning, and other legal stuff like that – while you go do ... Boy-Who-Lived things."

Jim laughed. "Ha, ha. Fair enough, Harry. You handle all the boring family business stuff and I'll go out and fight the bad guys."

Lily clucked her tongue and admonished Jim for such foolish ideas, while James just stared at Harry quietly with a strange look on his face, an odd mixture of embarrassment, guilt and ... anger? And then, Harry realized. He simply *knew* somehow that James had actually *tried* to disinherit Harry in favor of Jim and then found out he lacked the legal power to do so. Harry broke his eye contact with his father and turned to look out the car window as the London streets flew by. He couldn't show anger, not now. *And he wouldn't cry!*

After regaining control of his emotions, Harry turned back to his family, his mask firmly back in place. The rest of the trip was spent making idle chitchat with his parents, especially his mother. What was it like as a muggleborn student? Should Harry expect the same treatment as a half-blood who was muggle-raised? Where do muggleborns get their magic from anyway? Harry already had a few ideas on that last question, and he'd spent some of his time between his birthday and today wheedling family history out of Petunia, but he was curious as to what a Muggle Studies professor might think. Her response – which boiled down to *"nobody likes to talk very much about that"* – was not reassuring, particularly in light of the mild condescension his father seemed to have for what his mother went

through as a brilliant but prickly Muggleborn. Oh, and he had a lot of bad things to say about someone named "Snivellus" about whom Lily would say nothing, though the mention of his name seemed to make her sad.

"Oh well," thought Harry. *"If someone like James Potter has gone to all the trouble of giving this 'Snivellus' an insulting nickname, he can't be too bad."*

Introductions on a Train

Chapter 5: Introductions on a Train

Not long after, the Potter family made its way through the entrance at Kings Crossing. They were delayed for a bit as both James and Jim had to glad-hand with various friends and hangers-on. A shy chubby kid named Longbottom was there with his grandmother (a stern-looking old biddy with what appeared to be a stuffed vulture mounted on her head) and his rather creepy-looking uncle who kept lecturing the boy about "not losing his toad." Harry actually assumed that was some strange magical euphemism until the boy pulled an actual toad out of a pocket to prove he still had it. Harry shrugged and shook his head. The ginger kid from Madam Malkins was also there, along with a small army of relatives, including another set of identical twins who seemed to idolize James Potter for his former juvenile delinquency and a young girl whose eyes were fixed on Jim with breathless adoration.

Oh, and they had to stop for pictures, as the Daily Prophet was on hand to chronicle the Boy-Who-Lived as he started off for Hogwarts and so wanted pictures of him and his parents standing next to the train. This was apparently something the Potters were used to, so much so in fact that they completely forgot about Harry ... again. So did most everyone else, as a photographer nearly knocked him down. After a few minutes, he leaned over to Longbottom's grandmother (who at least had the decency to seem appalled on his behalf at how the Potters were acting) and asked her to let his parents know he'd went ahead to find a seat.

Once aboard, Harry deliberately sought a compartment near the rear of the train, hoping it might take a while for Jim to find him. After the train pulled out, he sat alone for twenty minutes reviewing his copy of **Dilworth's Guide to Wizarding Etiquette** before the door opened, and a bushy-haired girl stepped into his compartment.

"Excuse me, but by any chance have you seen a toad? A boy named Neville has lost his."

"Blond first year? Yeah, I noticed them both on the platform before we left, but I haven't seen either him or his toad since." Harry thought for a moment. "You should ask one of the prefects. I think there's a summoning charm that should help, but it will be years before we're expected to know it. The incantation is *Accio* but I don't know the wand movements. Or if that doesn't work, I'm sure they know some kind of detection spell that would help."

"Oh, that is a good idea, thank you." Then, her eyes lit up. "Is that a book on *wizarding etiquette*? How interesting!" And then the girl was off, rattling off a startling number of personal details – how much she liked reading, how she was the first witch in her family and hoped she wouldn't be disadvantaged by that, how she'd read every single textbook assigned to First Years and even done a few spells, how her parents were both dentists – all on a single breath, before finally pausing to say "Oh, I'm sorry. I haven't even introduced myself. I'm Hermione Granger."

"Harry Potter. A pleasure to meet you."

"Potter? By any chance are you related to Jim Potter?"

Harry took a breath, and his fake smile slide back into place. Interestingly, Hermione Granger seemed a bit more astute than any of the Potters, and her face registered a

mild concern, as if she'd just said something rude but wasn't sure what.

"Yes. He's my brother."

"Really? I've read several books about him and none of them mention him having a twin brother."

"I know. I've been living with relatives since I was a baby for ... reasons."

"... reasons?"

Harry paused and sighed. "Miss Granger, two things. First, I just found out about my parents, my brother and this whole 'Boy-Who-Lived' thing about a month ago. Which, I have to say, is a bit of a sore subject right now and, no offense, one I don't wish to discuss with someone I've just met."

Hermione blushed. "I understand. I apologize for any offense."

"None taken."

"And the other thing?"

Harry hesitated. "Well, now I'm worried that I might offend you. I promise I don't mean to but ... You say you've read all the text books already. Have you read any books on wizarding etiquette?"

Hermione stiffened at the preemptive apology but then was intrigued by his question. "No, no I haven't. There weren't any mentioned on the list we were given and it didn't occur to me to ask. I mean, other than the magic, Hogwarts is still just another British boarding school, isn't it? It's not like

we're moving to Japan or Dubai or someplace that different."

"Actually, I've been cramming for the last month, and from what I've pieced together, it's *a lot* like moving to a foreign country. See, there's this thing called the Statute of Secrecy that was enacted about 300 years ago that requires near-total separation between wizards and Muggles, and Wizarding Britain takes it *really* seriously. That's three centuries in which most wizards ignored what Muggles were doing as much as possible. Most wizards don't know much about TV and movies and nothing at all about computers or the space program. With magic, you can instantly fix cavities and other tooth-related issues, so most wizards probably won't know what a dentist is or, if they've heard the word, will probably assume your parents yank teeth out with rusty pliers and no anesthetic. Now, I don't mean to say the wizarding world as backwards. It's actually a lot more progressive than the Muggle world in some ways but weirdly formal in others. For example, wizards don't have any problems at all with the idea of a woman in a position of high authority like Minister of Magic or Chief Warlock, but a lot of them seem to get really touchy if you don't properly refer to a woman as Madame if she's married and Miss if she's not. In a lot of ways, I think going away to school in Japan or Dubai might involve less culture shock than where we're headed."

Hermione sat down with a concerned look on her face. "I suppose it might," she said slowly. "Is that why you made a point of calling me *Miss* Granger?"

Harry held up his copy of **Dilworth's**. "There's *a whole chapter* in here on when it is or is not appropriate to call someone by their first name. My impression is that to most

people, it doesn't matter ... but to the wizards and witches *who run the country*, it matters a *lot*."

The girl nodded at that. "But why did you think I might be offended at that?"

"Well, you're obviously smart, but you are obviously proud of your Muggle heritage. Which is fine! My, um, mother was a Muggleborn and she's a Hogwarts professor teaching Muggle Studies. Being Half-Blooded and Muggle-raised myself, I don't have any problem at all with Muggleborns. But the last Wizarding War – the one that ended when Jim Potter destroyed You-Know-Who – was started by Purebloods who wanted to kill all the Muggleborns because of a crazy belief that they were somehow stealing magic away from Pureblood children. And the Wizarding War before *that* was started by Purebloods who wanted to conquer the Muggle world outright because they thought wizards were just naturally superior and it was only proper that we should rule over the Muggles for their own good. I certainly don't think you should *hide* your Muggle heritage, just as I don't plan to. But I think our time at Hogwarts might be a lot less enjoyable if we don't address the fact that, well, *we're* the outsiders here."

The two continued to talk for a good five minutes. About what little they both knew about wizarding politics and history. About the incredibly vague definitions of Pureblood, Halfblood, and Muggleborn. About the vast number of unwritten rules that mark Muggleborns as outsiders. About how in the otherwise highly secular Wizarding Britain, it was a horrible faux pas to take the Lord's name in vain, so most people use "Merlin!" as a generic expletive.

"Honestly," said Harry. "I only care about this stuff because ... well, because my father, James Potter, is from a very old

Pureblood family. And someday, Merlin willing, I'll inherit his seat in the Wizengamot, so I'm trying not to accidentally insult anyone important needlessly."

"Merlin... willing," she repeated while shaking her head. "That's going to take getting used to. Any other major blunders I should avoid making? Bearing in mind that I don't plan on changing my principles just to appease bigots."

"Me neither. And like I said, I don't think most wizards care about etiquette unless you do something *very* offensive or the wizard is a Pureblood from a very old family, but better safe than sorry." Harry thought for a second. "Oh, here's a big one that's important to us since we're just now starting school. *Never* raise your hand in class."

"What?!" Hermione said incredulously.

"Well, more specifically, never raise your hand in class unless you're asking the teacher a question or they have clearly asked for a volunteer, usually after someone else has tried to answer and flubbed it. Whenever the teacher first asks a question, he usually has someone specific that he plans on asking but is just giving the student a few seconds to prepare an answer. My ... my mother was *very specific* about this. Apparently, when she was a First Year, she was treated as an outcast and couldn't figure out why. Finally, someone took pity and told her that raising her hand every single time the teacher asked a question implied that she thought her classmates were too dumb to know the answer if called upon."

"Wow," she said. "I would never have considered it like that if you hadn't explained it to me!" She blushed slightly.

"Before Hogwarts, I went to a gifted school where

classroom participation was a big part of the grade. I'd have made a complete fool of myself if I'd gone into Hogwarts with the same attitude."

Harry nodded sagely. "There's a lot of fiddling stuff like that can cause newcomers to this world like us to stick out like a sore thumb if we're not careful. Basically, Miss Granger, you and I are about to start our first year at Oxbridge, you as a scholarship student, me as a legacy raised abroad, and neither one of us having been raised to know anything about Oxbridge culture."

Hermione looked down at the floor. It was a lot to take in. "Do you think, Har... Mr. Potter, that I'll be discriminated against because my parents are Muggles?"

Harry hesitated. "I'm ... not sure. Personally, I reckon I'll be treated like an outsider to some degree, at least at the start, and I'll have to figure out to react from there. I'm sure some people will be biased against both of us because of our heritage. Of course, not everyone will feel that way, and even the bigots will hopefully be somewhat restrained since their side lost the last war." He paused. "Have you thought about what House you want into?"

"I was hoping for Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. Why? Do they have different attitudes towards Muggleborns?"

"Well, all I really know on that topic is what my parents told me, so take this with a grain of salt. A lot of Slytherins followed You-Know-Who during the last war, and I'm sure some of their children will be among our peers, so I'd expect them to be hostile to Muggleborns and probably to the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived. Not all I hope, but it's to be expected. The Ravenclaws are the most academically focused, so you might like that, but they're very traditional

and have a reputation for elitism, so it might be kind of cutthroat. The Hufflepuffs pride themselves on tolerance and accepting everyone, but the price they pay for it is to be looked down upon by the other Houses as lacking standards. My father called them the House of Duffers, but I doubt *that's* true, seeing as how there have been more Hufflepuff Ministers of Magic than any other House. Surprisingly, my birth mother said that Muggleborns do best in Gryffindor. They're the closest thing to a House of Rebels we'll find, and apparently they embrace Muggleborns and Halfbloods just to thumb their noses at traditionalist Purebloods. They're also the ones least interested in formality and etiquette so they'll be more forgiving of minor social mistakes. Of course, she was a Gryffindor herself, so she might be biased."

Hermione rose. "Well, you've given me a lot to think about, Mr. Potter. But I suppose I'd better go and find Neville ... Mr. Longbottom, I mean, and see what luck he's had with his toad." She turned at the door. "Mr. Potter, what books would you recommend to learn more about what we talked about?"

Harry smiled, genuinely this time, and he rattled off the names of three etiquette books. "If they don't have those in the Hogwarts library, just ask and I'll let you borrow my copies."

"Thank you." She paused while trying to remember how the people in **Pride and Prejudice** talked to one another. "And Mr. Potter, if I am not being presumptuous in saying, I would be gratified if you would call me Hermione," she said with a smile of her own.

Harry laughed. "You are not being presumptuous at all, Hermione. And I would be equally pleased if you called me

Harry."

She nodded and left the compartment, as Harry returned to his etiquette book, pleased at having made his first tentative friendship. About ten minutes later, the door flew open and Jim entered, along with the red-headed boy Harry had encountered twice before.

"Hey, there you are!" exclaimed Jim. "I've been looking for you for ages. This is Ron Weasley. He'll be in our class. Ron, this is my brother, Harry!"

"Good to meet you, Harry," said Ron enthusiastically.

"Likewise," said Harry blandly. Internally, he thought "*Oh, yeah, definitely Gryffindor.*" Out loud, he said "Actually, I think we've already met. We were getting fitted together at Madame Malkin's."

"Oh, yeah! I remember you. You should have told me you were Jim's brother!"

"Well, I'd just found ... never mind. Let's just say it was a stressful day and I didn't think about it."

"Well anyway," said Jim, dropping into the seat next to Harry, with Ron opposite them. "I'm sorry we got caught up with those photographers. It's a pain sometimes. But Ron here introduced me to his brothers and they introduced me to the Gryffindor Quidditch team." He paused. "Say, do you know anything about Quidditch, Harry?"

"Not much. I know it's a strange combination of water polo, dodgeball, and capture the flag but played in the air on high speed flying broomsticks."

"Oookaay. I don't know what *any* of those are. But don't worry. Dad was an awesome chaser when he was in school, and he got me my first practice broom for my fourth birthday. We'll get you up to speed in no time."

Harry, who had spent his fourth birthday learning how to cook bacon and scrambled eggs for the Dursley's (with the threat of a frying pan to the head if anything was burnt), smiled that painful smile again. "I'm looking forward to it."

Suddenly, the compartment doors opened again, and yet another person barged in. This one was a thin, blond boy with aristocratic features. Behind him out in the corridor stood two stocky boys who would probably grow into hulking brutes within five years.

"I was told that James Potter, Jr., the Boy-Who-Lived, was in this car," said the newcomer imperiously. "Is it true?"

"He is," said Harry with some bemusement. "And you are?"

"Malfoy. Draco Malfoy of the Ancient and Noble House of Malfoy." Jim and Ron both sniggered at the boy's pomposity, but for some reason, he focused his ire solely on Ron. "I can tell what family you belong to. Red hair. Freckles. Hand-me-down robes. Undoubtedly a *Weasley*," he sneered.

Both Ron and Jim turned red in anger, while Harry's eyes narrowed. He recognized the name Malfoy and was quite surprised by how rudely the scion of such an important House was acting. Not to mention the *oddly specific* insults Malfoy had made towards someone he obviously didn't know before just now.

Ignoring Ron, Draco turned back to Harry but was surprised to finally notice that there were two very similar looking boys in the car. He made a guess and hoped

it *wasn't* the one a chocolate stain on his shirt who was presently giving him an angry glare. "So, are you James Potter?" he asked the more reputable looking one.

Harry shook his head and pointed at Jim who had stood up and moved threateningly close to Draco. The two thugs outside tensed and readied themselves for a fight. "I'm Jim Potter," he said. "What's it to you?"

Draco held his hands up to show he meant no threat. "Potter, please. I apologize if I offended you in any way. But you're a national icon and the Heir to an Ancient and Noble House. You're obviously going to need help finding the right sort of friends. I can help steer you away from the *wrong crowd*." From Draco's posture, it was clear "the wrong crowd" included Ron, whose face twisted into a mask of anger.

"I can find the *right sort* of friend without your help, Death Eater," sneered Jim.

Draco's eyes narrowed, while Harry watched the display, idly wishing he'd brought popcorn. "*Obviously*, there is no possibility of me being a Death Eater since *I'm eleven*. And if you refer to my father, then you should remember that the Wizengamot found him not guilty. So you should speak a little more thoughtfully, Potter, unless you wish to be sued for slander."

"Oh, come off it, Malfoy!" said Ron contemptuously. "Your family is as Slytherin as they come, and there's never been a dark wizard who wasn't a slimy Slytherin, from You-Know-Who to Grindelwald all the way back to Salazar Slytherin himself."

"Oh, well that's just nonsense," snapped Harry irritably. "First of all, no one knows what house You-Know-Who was

in or even if he went to Hogwarts, and Grindelwald definitely went to Durmstrang. Yes, most of the convicted Death Eaters were Slytherins, but there were also Death Eaters from other Houses. Barty Crouch Jr. was a Ravenclaw, and Sirius Black, You-Know-Who's lieutenant, was a Gryffindor. And anyway, the worst Dark Lord to have ever attended Hogwarts was Emeric the Evil back in the 14th Century, and he actually claimed that it was his Gryffindor nature that gave him the courage to defy all mundane standards of decency and morality."

The other boys in the compartment looked at Harry as if he'd grown a second head.

"Um, you sure know a lot about dark wizards," said Ron.

Harry shrugged. "It was all in **The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts**." He turned to look at Jim. "I bought it to read the section about you and You-Know-Who, but it had chapters on all the other major British dark wizards since the founding of Hogwarts. Admittedly, most were Slytherins, but Gryffindor and Ravenclaw have each had plenty dark wizards, and even the Hufflepuffs have produced one in the last five centuries."

Draco stared at him in confusion. "Who *are* you? Since when has the Boy-Who-Lived had a twin brother?"

Harry stood up to look Draco in the eye. "Since birth, obviously. And you were mistaken earlier. I, Harry Potter, am Heir Presumptive to the Ancient and Noble House of Potter. And while I will not be as blunt as my brother, I must tell you, Mr. Malfoy, that you have made a bad first impression. I think it would be best if you leave before things escalate into something ... unpleasant."

Draco studied Harry carefully. "So be it." Then, he left the compartment and headed down the corridor, minions in tow. Jim turned to grin at Harry.

"That was awesome, Har! 'Leave before things escalate into something ... *unpleasant*.' Wicked. I bet if you talked to those Muggles like that, they wouldn't give you any problems at all."

Harry's head snapped towards Jim, and his eyes lit up as if he'd been slapped. To his side, Ron asked what Jim had meant about "Muggles" but his voice sounded strangely far away. Jim, suddenly unnerved, looked back and forth between Harry and Ron before he finally spoke.

"It's nothing, Ron. Forget I mentioned it. Hey, Har? You want to learn to play Exploding Snap?"

Harry studied his brother as if examining a bug. Then, he considered the question. Not the question of "*do you want to learn to play Exploding Snap?*" but the much more pressing question of "*do you want to spend the next seven years pretending to smile when you'd rather snarl or scream?*" And he made his decision.

"Actually, right now, I'd like to go find the loo," he said brightly. "I assume this train has one if the ride is six hours long."

"Oh yeah," said Jim. "We passed the restrooms on the way here. Just follow in the direction the three mini-Death Eaters went."

"Thanks, Jim." Harry stepped past his brother and out the door, closing it behind him. He walked a few feet down the corridor and then, on impulse, crept back to the edge of the compartment he'd just left. Then, he listened.

"No offense, Jim, but your brother is a little weird."

"I know. When he was a baby, Mum and Dad thought he was going to be a squib, so they sent him to live with Muggle relatives. Apparently, they were kind of mean to him and he blames our parents. He's being a right baby about it to be honest, but Mum insisted I stay close to him until he gets over his anger. Whatever."

Harry exhaled very slowly. Then, he turned and moved quickly down the corridor and into the next car. Malfoy and his as-yet unnamed goons were up ahead. "Mr. Malfoy!" he called out.

Malfoy stopped and turned as Harry walked up to the trio. "What do you want, Potter? I thought you'd made your feelings quite clear."

"I did. And, to be fair, Malfoy, you *did* make a poor first impression. Happily, I don't make snap judgments based on first impressions. And while I can *also* decide for myself who the 'right sort of people' are, I won't be influenced by my father and brother's biases in the process. Now, I don't know yet where I'll be Sorted, but I hope you and I can have, at the very least, an amiable relationship regardless of our Sortings. We are the future of our respective families, after all."

"I find it unlikely, Potter, that there can ever be an amiable association between a Slytherin and a Gryffindor."

"Then we're in luck, Malfoy. Because I think it's *highly* unlikely that either of us is going to be a Gryffindor." And then, Harry stuck out his hand, and after a second of hesitation, Draco took it.

Seven hours later, the Sorting Hat whispered into Harry Potter's head. "Oh good. I was afraid you were going to be difficult about this." And then, in a booming voice, it yelled out ...

"SLYTHERIN!"

Day One in the Snake Pit

Chapter 6: Day One in The Snake Pit

2 September 1991

Harry awoke from eight hours of wonderful sleep in the most comfortable bed he'd ever been allowed to even touch. As his roommates stirred around the First Year Slytherin dorm, he thought back to the night before. Jim had, of course, gone into Gryffindor and actually had the temerity to look hurt and betrayed when Harry went Slytherin. The Weasel had joined him, as had (surprisingly) the timid Longbottom boy and (less surprisingly) Hermione. Poor Longbottom looked terrified of everything and probably might have been happier in Hufflepuff, but from his observations before boarding the Hogwarts Express, Harry gathered that his parents had been Lions and that his grandmother and especially his great-uncle would deem him a failure if he hadn't followed suit. Still, if the boy got some confidence, maybe he could adapt to his new situation. Hermione, as he'd suggested on the train, might actually do quite well in Gryffindor if she could adapt to that house's anarchic culture.

The Hat actually called Draco Malfoy for Slytherin before it sat all the way down on his head, which Harry found amusing. It sorted Blaise Zabini nearly as fast, but took a few minutes for Theo Nott, a shy, thin boy who seemed almost ... resigned to being a Slytherin. There were four girls also sorted into Slytherin: Greengrass, Davis, Parkinson and Bulstrode. Malfoy – for the two were not yet on a first name basis – quietly told Harry that Greengrass and Parkinson were both Purebloods from Noble (but not Ancient) families, while Davis and Bulstrode were both Half-

bloods from "unimportant" families. Despite their differing backgrounds, Greengrass and Davis somehow knew each other and were friends. Bulstrode seemed a bit of a loner, while Parkinson practically cooed over Draco. She hinted that Draco and she had an arranged marriage ("*At the age of eleven?!*" thought Harry), the mention of which caused Draco to turn a bit green.

Crabbe and Goyle also made it into Slytherin. In fact, their Sortings were the reason Harry's own took several minutes. The Hat immediately suggested Slytherin, and in principle, Harry didn't object. But he'd spent time talking to Crabbe and Goyle on the train, and during his Sorting, Harry had bluntly asked the Hat how two monosyllabic slabs of beef could have gotten into "the house of cunning and ambition." The Hat hemmed and hawed before finally admitting that it had tried to direct both boys into Hufflepuff, but it was bound by certain rules put in place during the Middle Ages to sort children of "vassal families" into the same houses as their "liege lords." The Crabbes and Goyles (and to a lesser extent, the Parkinsons) were bound to the Malfoys by magical contracts dating back several centuries, the nature of which the Hat was not at liberty to disclose. *But* if Harry wanted to learn more about such things, he should *definitely* go to Slytherin because there were quite a few snakes hidden in the paintings and worked into furnishings of their dormitory that, in the Hat's opinion, were "prone to gossip." Since exploring his Parseltongue gift in controlled and discrete circumstances was high on Harry's to-do list, that was a clincher.

Of course, the placement of the Boy-Who-Lived's mysterious brother came off as quite a scandal. Dumbledore looked disappointed, as did "Mum." More troubling was the fact that Professor Snape, his head of house, looked outright homicidal. Later, he would send the prefects to deliver the

orientation speech to the Slytherin First Years. According to some of the older students, that was the first time he hadn't welcomed the students personally since any of them had been at Hogwarts. Oh, and for some reason, the DADA instructor gave him a sharp headache every time he turned his head.

On the bright side, Harry's extended Sorting also gave him an idea for how to spin his Slytherin status. *"I begged the Hat for Gryffindor, honest I did! But then, it asked why and I said I wanted to help protect Jim! And then the Hat said 'Well, where do you think most threats to the Boy-Who-Lived are going to come from?' So I thought it over ..."* That, to Harry, seemed plausible enough for James to believe, and going undercover among "the slimy snakes" seems like something that would amuse a prankster like him. Harry resolved to send a letter to his birth-father right after breakfast.

"Good morning, Malfoy!" Harry exclaimed cheerfully as he jumped out of bed.

"Morning, Potter. You seem chipper today."

"First day of school, and the first day of the rest of our lives." With that, Harry made his way to the bathroom for a quick shower. On the way in, he passed Theo and caught a quick glimpse of the boy's back which was marked with a number of scars. Only years of experience in keeping his head down at the Dursleys kept him from staring. Harry thankfully only had one similar scar but it was enough to know what kind of mark a cane left, as well as to learn never to comment on Vernon Dursley's weight. It troubled Harry to realize that even in the wizarding world, child abuse was apparently tolerated.

Thirty minutes later, he passed through the doors of the Great Hall, which was mostly-full at this point. Jim and Ron were already at the Gryffindor table. Ron nudged Jim as soon as Harry walked in, and the two scowled at him. Jim actually sneered, but he also had a strange look of excitement, as if he expected something to happen soon. Hermione and Longbottom were sitting several seats down from them. Hermione was chatting amiably with several of the older Gryffs, while Longbottom kept to himself. Harry made his way to the Slytherin table on the opposite side of the room and sat down between Malfoy and Nott.

A few minutes later, the day's owl deliveries began, and a majestic horned owl headed towards the Slytherin table with a blood red envelope clutched in its talons. Immediately, Theo Nott tensed and stopped breathing. Concerned, Harry asked if the boy was all right, but Theo did not relax until the owl dropped the red envelope onto the table in front of Harry.

"Ooooh," squealed the Parkinson girl maliciously. "Look everybody! Potter's got a Howler!"

The other Slytherins backed away while still staying close enough to see his reaction. "And what, pray tell, is a 'Howler'?" Harry asked nonchalantly. Across the room, Harry could see Jim and Ron standing up to get a better view and openly laughing, so he doubted it was anything good.

Theo answered urgently. "It's an angry letter, Potter. A *very* angry letter. The longer you wait to open it, the louder it will be. And if you wait too long, it will explode."

Harry glanced around the room again. His housemates were all waiting to see how he responded. In fact, the noise

level in the whole room dropped to a soft murmuring as the wizard-raised children all seemed to know what a Howler was and didn't want to miss the show. At the Head Table, most of the teachers looked somewhat interested, though Lily Potter had her hand over her face in an expression of absolute horror.

Harry chuckled. "Wow. An screaming explosive letter. And a school that tolerates them being sent to eleven-year-old children at breakfast in front of their fellow students. How ... professional." He reached forward and slashed at the Howler's seal a butter knife and then leaned back in his chair casually, picking up his pumpkin juice to sip as he listened.

HARRY POTTER!

WHEN JIM /hic/ WROTE TO ME ABOUT YOUR SORTING I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT! I KNEW ... JUST KNEW LETTING YOU COME BACK TO US WAS A MISTAKE! NO POTTER HAS EVER BEEN SORTED INTO SLIMY SLITHERY SNAKEY SLYTHERIN! AND AFTER YOU'RE DONE /hic/ DISGRACING OUR HOUSE, I HOPE NO POTTER EVER IS AGAIN! I'M /hic/ WARNING YOU NOW, IF YOU STEP ONE FOOT OUT OF LINE, IF YOU GIVE THE TINIEST HINT THAT YOU'RE /hic/ TURNING EVIL OR ANYTHING, I WILL YANK YOU OUT OF THAT SCHOOL AND WANT YOUR SNAP... I MEAN SNAP YOUR WAND MYSELF! I WILL DISINHERIT YOU FROM HOUSE POTTER AND HAVE YOU BACK WITH THOSE DURGLS ... /hic/DURSLEY MUGGLES BEFORE THE SUN SETS! THIS IS THE ONLY WARNING YOU'RE GOING TO GET!

**YOUR HUMILIATED FATHER,
JAMES CHARLUS LORD POTTER**

And then, the letter burst into flames and quickly disintegrated. Silence reigned over the hall. At the Head Table, most of the teachers bore expressions of shock and embarrassment. Even Dumbledore seemed astonished by James's vitriol and cruelty, not to mention the fact that he was quite obviously drunk when he wrote and sent the Howler. Lily Potter jumped up and stormed out of the room. Only Severus Snape maintained his composure despite his personal delight in how James Potter had humiliated his entire family with a single letter. He waited to see what happened next. How the Potter boy reacted could make or break him in Slytherin House. Personally, he expected the boy to break and run out crying to the laughter of his own house and that of his revolting twin. Instead, to Snape's astonishment, the boy ... *burst into laughter*.

"Amazing! So my dad's a *drunk* as well as an idiot. Good to know." And then, he stood and held up his glass of pumpkin juice in the direction of his younger twin *in salute*.

"And nicely played by you too, Little Brother!" he called out across the hall with the appearance of good cheer, as if the Howler had just been an amusing little prank. "Did you have to break curfew to tattle on me last night? Or maybe petty little rules like that don't apply to the Boy-Who-Lived."

Jim's face grew furious at that, and he jumped up onto the table, knocking over dishes and pitchers. "YOU THINK THIS IS FUNNY, YOU SLYTHERIN *FILTH*!" he yelled, which only made Harry laugh louder as he sat back down.

Finally, just as Jim was ready to yell something else, Minerva McGonagall's voice bellowed across the room. "James Potter. Jr., sit down this instant! I don't want to hear another word from you! And twenty points from Gryffindor for disrupting breakfast and for insulting another House!"

Jim looked stricken to have cost his house so many points before classes had even started, and he slowly sat down, sparing one final hateful look towards Harry who was wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

Over at the Slytherin table, the rest of the House slowly returned to their seats while warily studying their house mate and his strange reaction. His laughter over, Harry returned to quietly eating his breakfast while going over notes for his first Transfiguration class. His mood was obviously (and to his classmates, bizarrely) cheerful.

"Uh, Potter?" said Nott timidly. "Are ... are you okay?"

"Never better, Theo. May I call you Theo? I hope that's not presumptuous of me. You can, of course, call me Harry if you wish."

"Okay then, um, Harry. You took that Howler, well, much better than one would expect."

"Oh that bit of rubbish," Harry said with a grin. "There's nothing to that. Just a ridiculous man yelling at me. And I've had people much more ridiculous than him yelling at me for years and usually a lot more loudly." He took a bite of toast and chewed it slowly as if collecting his thoughts before turning back to the other boy. "For a long time, I put up with that sort of thing because I didn't know any better and didn't have any other choices. And now, *I do*. You see, Theo, that man imagines that he's my father and that gives him some sort of right to be abusive to me. But the truth is, he's *never* been my father in any way that matters. And no matter how much he yells and makes a fool of himself, I know full well that he's got no power over me that I don't allow him, and I've just decided to allow him none at all." He chuckled quietly. "It's ... good, actually, that things came to a

head so quickly. I was toying with the idea of at least *pretending* to be a good son to James Potter. But after that display? Nah. Not a chance. It's total war now."

Theo looked at Harry with something very much like awe, but the rest of his classmates seemed to think he'd gone mad. Meanwhile, Harry turned towards Draco.

"Speaking of which ... Mr. Malfoy. I know we're not very far into our association, but might I ask you for a small favor?"

Malfoy, who for some strange reason was mildly jealous that Harry hadn't asked to use his first name, said, "What sort of favor, Mr. Potter?"

"Would you mind very much owling your parents and asking if they could recommend a good solicitor? One experienced in Wizengamot inheritance laws?"

Draco Malfoy stared at the Brother-Of-The-Boy-Who-Lived. And then, it was his turn to laugh.

Later that evening, Harry was alone in the Slytherin common room finishing up his homework for the first day before going to bed. His first day of classes had gone rather well, notwithstanding his birth-father's tantrum. Transfiguring matchsticks into needles still eluded him as it did everyone else in Slytherin, but he'd been awarded two points in Charms. He'd also made a few allies ("friends" was premature, but Harry was optimistic). As Harry stood up and stretched, he noticed a painting above the fireplace of a puff adder curled over some books on a writing desk. Feeling slightly foolish, he walked over to the painting, looked around to make sure no one else was present, and then focused his attention on the snake. "Um, hello. My name's Harry," he said softly. The snake in the painting

twitched and then looked up at him before hissing a response. Harry smiled warmly as another friendship of a different sort was born.

Potions and Process

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

CHAPTER SEVEN: Potions and Process

6 September 1991

After the events of the previous Monday, Jim was more subdued. Apparently, the other Gryffindors were upset at him losing so many points so quickly, and he'd also received a thorough dressing down from both his mother and McGonagall. He'd written his father to complain, but apparently James was in the doghouse with Lily over his own actions. She'd actually sent him a Howler of her own that went off in the middle of the Auror's Office - "**LET'S SEE HOW YOU LIKE IT!**" - and so James advised the boy to let things settle for a while. Not that Lily herself had actually reached out to Harry, who didn't know if she disagreed with James' views on his Sorting or was simply embarrassed by James firing off a Howler at her place of employment. Regardless, Jim and Ron avoided Harry, although he felt certain that his twin had some idiotic Potteresque plan for revenge.

Meanwhile, Neville Longbottom apparently had some sort of falling out with the two and made a point of partnering himself with Harry during Herbology. Harry was dubious at first until Neville nervously admitted that he was frightened of Snape and desperate to pass Potions. He hoped that with an obviously intelligent young Slytherin as his Potions partner, he might make it through unscathed.

"I have three conditions, Mr. Longbottom" said Harry somewhat imperiously. "One: we do not sit anywhere near my brother unless absolutely necessary."

"O..okay, um, Mr. Potter," stammered the nervous boy.

Harry took a step forward. "Two: From now on, you keep your chin up, you look people straight in the eye, and you always speak with confidence, whether you feel it or not. Because you are Longbottom of Longbottom, Heir Presumptive to an Ancient and Noble House. Just as I am Potter of Potter. And if the two of us are going actually earn the legacies our family names have left us, we'd both better get started now."

And with that, he put his hand out. "And Three: You call me Harry."

Neville blinked several times. Then, he straightened his back, took a deep breath, and shook Harry's hand. "Just as you will call me Neville, I hope." Harry smiled. He wasn't sure, but he could have sworn the boy just grew an inch-and-a-half.

Initially, it was Harry who got the better end of the deal, as Neville was a certifiable genius at Herbology, already able to talk conversationally about plants from the Fourth Year curriculum. Apparently, the Longbottoms had made their fortune in the growing and selling of exotic magical plants of all types and he'd been up to his knees among them since before he could walk. It wasn't until Friday that Harry and Neville made it to their first Potions class, and there was a crowd outside the locked door. Theo came over to join the two. Malfoy followed with a sneer on his face and Crabbe and Goyle on each side. Harry still wasn't sure which was which.

"Honestly, Potter, you're partnering with Longbottom again? You're squandering what little status you have as a Slytherin by hanging with such lumps."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You baffle me, Malfoy. I understand why you're hostile to the Potters, though I have no idea what Weasley could have done to make you hate him on sight. And now, you're antagonizing the Longbottom Heir? Has your father *instructed* you to make enemies of all the Ancient and Noble Houses?"

Malfoy's face flushed, but then his eyes hardened. "I don't think it will ever be possible for the Malfoys and Longbottoms to ever be anything *but* enemies after what his grandmother did," he spat.

Harry crooked an eyebrow and looked back to Neville, who took a deep breath but met Draco's glare without wavering. "He's referring to an incident from when we were both five years old during which my Gran caused a scene and loudly referred to his parents as '*Death Eater swine*' in a crowded restaurant."

Harry pursed his lips and exhaled. "Alright, I can understand why someone might possibly hold a grudge..."

"In her defense, Malfoy's aunt, his uncle, his uncle's brother, and two of his cousins were known Death Eaters, three of whom were responsible for the assault on my parents that left them both ... permanently disabled, and one of whom was the man who betrayed your family to You-Know-Who, so her assumption was not wholly unwarranted. *Also*, his father, whose family has supported Pureblood policies for generations, avoided conviction for a number of Death Eater-related crimes after claiming to have been under the Imperius Curse. I'm sure it's just a

coincidence that within days of his acquittal, St. Mungo's Hospital received a huge donation big enough to pay for the construction of the 'Abraxas Malfoy Memorial Children's Ward.'"

Draco and his minion bowed up as if ready to fight. Harry looked around. The Git and the Weasel were further down the hall but were looking that way. Jim coming over was the last thing Harry was in the mood to deal with.

"Alright, listen up, both of you. I am *not* going to judge anyone I meet at this school based on what any of their relatives may or may not have done. And I'm not going to surrender the benefits of having a Herbology genius as my lab partner because of something that happened when you were both *five*! Nor will I blame the Malfoys for something Sirius Black did, seeing as how I looked it up and Sirius Black was one of my cousins, too. In fact, I think, Neville, that he was distantly one of yours. Now then, we're all going to be stuck with each other in some capacity for another seven years. Can we at least try to be civil to one another in spite of what our relatives think? The three of us will hopefully all be on the Wizengamot together some day. We may all hate each other by then, but can we resolve now that we'll hate each other for things we actually did to one another instead of relying on feuds passed down like family heirlooms?"

Longbottom and Malfoy stared balefully at one another, when the Git spoke up down the hall. "Hey, Longbottom! Don't let these slimy snakes bully you around! Stand up for yourself!"

Neville raised his chin without breaking Malfoy's eye contact for a few seconds. Then, he turned towards Jim. "I don't know what you're on about, Potter. Malfoy had just

come to me with some questions about his Herbology assignment. Isn't that right, Malfoy?"

The corner of Malfoy's mouth twitched a bit, but he composed himself quickly. "Quite so, Longbottom. I'm grateful for your advice. You're a credit to your house," he said loudly before turning away and making eye contact with Jim, "unlike some others I could name."

Jim made a face and then turned back to talk with Ron when the door to the Potions class was suddenly jerked open. Professor Snape stared angrily at the assembled Gryffindors and Slytherins, as if annoyed there was no fight for him to break up. "Inside, all of you," he barked.

As the students filed in, Harry put his hand on Neville's shoulder. "Neville," he said softly, "I'm sorry about your parents. I didn't know. And thank you for... for being a bigger man than Malfoy deserved."

Neville shrugged but smiled a bit at the compliment. "Eh, he was just lucky that Jim's been more of a prat this week than him. He's been strutting around like Godric Gryffindor himself all week long, and most of us are sick of it."

"Not surprising. If you happen to know, how is Hermione Granger doing?"

"You could ask me yourself, you know," said an amused Hermione from behind his back.

"Ack! You startled me, Miss ... um, Hermione?" Harry said with uncharacteristic nervousness. He had not spoken to his first Hogwarts friend since before the Sorting, and he wasn't completely sure they were still on a first name basis given the rivalry between their houses. The smile she gave reassured him that they were.

"Hello, Harry. I'm so sorry I haven't had a chance to come talk to you, but I had promised to sit with Parvati and Lavender in Herbology, and this is our only other class together. Incidentally, the books you recommended were all in the Library and extremely helpful, even if most Gryffindors aren't as well-mannered as Neville here." Neville blushed at the compliment. "If you're free and interested, Neville and I have a study session planned in the Library for the free period after lunch."

"Yeah, please come, Harry. Hermione's been a real life-saver!"

"Sure thing. Oh, forgive me. Hermione Granger, this is Theodore Nott of the House of Nott."

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Granger," Theo said tersely.

"Likewise, Mr. Nott."

By the time the four students made it into the classroom, the only seats left were near the front, and unfortunately, right next to Jim and Ron, though Ron, Hermione and Neville separated the two feuding brothers. As the children settled in, Professor Snape reentered from the back storeroom with a flourish and proceeded to give a speech alluding to the superiority of potion-making to the "foolish wand-waving" of other branches of magic. Then, he took roll, pausing to remark on "James Potter Jr., our new ... *celebrity*." Snape had also glared at Harry when reading his name out, but he made no comments.

Instead, he suddenly barked "Potter!" before clarifying "James Potter! What would I get if I added powdered root of Asphodel to an infusion of Wormwood?"

Jim rolled his eyes contemptuously. "I don't know, *sir*. Obviously not shampoo, though."

The room went deathly quiet. Almost in unison, Harry, Neville and Hermione slowly turned their heads towards Jim Potter in complete amazement. Ron was grinning like a mad man, but the rest of the Gryffindors were horrified.

"Five points from Gryffindor for your cheek, Potter. Here's an easier one: Where would you find a bezoar?"

Harry saw Hermione flinch her arm and suppressed a smile. It was apparently taking all of her willpower not to raise her hand.

"Sunken within the greasy depths of your hair, perhaps?" Jim asked sarcastically.

"Another ten points from Gryffindor!"

"My father said you'd be like this – bullying, snide, and cruel – and that you'd probably try to make an example out of me by asking a bunch of obscure trivia questions first thing. He also said to call you Snivellus."

"Twenty points from Gryffindor! Did he also mention I can do this all day? Here's another one: What's the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

"No idea. What's the difference between..."

"JAMES POTTER JR. WILL YOU STOP ACTING LIKE AN IGNORANT BRAYING ASS!"

The entire class, including Snape, stared in astonishment at Hermione Granger, who had shot out of her chair and was literally shaking in rage at Jim's antics. After a few seconds

of dead silence, Snape quietly said "Five points *to* Gryffindor." Hermione took a deep breath and slowly sat down.

Snape turned back to Jim and said, more quietly, "I've had quite enough of your idiocy for one day, Mr. Potter. I'll be discussing this matter with your Head of House ... and your mother. If you will have no respect for my authority, perhaps you will show some for theirs." Jim fumed at that but said nothing more.

"However," said Snape silkily, "in this instance, we have an unusual opportunity to investigate the relative value of nature versus nurture. Mr. *Harry* Potter! Can you answer even one of the questions I posed to your brother?"

Harry coughed. "I'm confident I can answer all three, sir. In reverse order, monkshood and wolfsbane are two of the many common names for the poisonous flowering plants of the aconite family. And if I had to find a bezoar somewhere around *here*, I would look for an emergency kit or, failing that, search the store rooms in the section containing animal byproduct supplies."

"Explain," ordered Snape. "For your less educated peers." He sneered at a sulking Jim Potter as he said that.

"Well, a bezoar is a small stone formed of undigested plant matter and harvested from the stomach of a goat. The textbook said that it can counteract most poisons, although I don't believe it actually mentioned which poisons it would *not* cure."

"For future reference, Mr. Potter, it will not cure poisons derived from dragon's blood or basilisk venom, though thankfully those are rare. And my first question?"

"Er, yes sir. Adding powdered root of Asphodel to an infusion of Wormwood is the first step in the creation of a extremely powerful sleeping potion. I'm afraid I can't recall the exact name of it," he turned to look directly at his fuming brother, "but I do recall it was on the *very first page* of the assigned reading." And then he smiled. And it didn't hurt at all.

Curiously, Snape did not award Harry any points for his correct answers, even though he was notorious for favoring Slytherins in his Potions classes. The rest of the period passed relatively uneventfully, save for one hiccup. Snape did not allow Harry and Neville to partner as they had agreed. Instead, he placed Neville with Hermione and Harry with Theo. Neville was initially panicked at this change of plans until Harry reassured him that Hermione was probably better at potion-brewing than him anyway, and the four of them would be at adjacent cauldrons. There were a few near explosions, but Hermione kept Neville calm and on-task, and Harry was close enough to whisper some advice and words of encouragement. Eventually, Neville and Hermione produced an acceptable Boil-Curing Potion, as did Theo and Harry. Ron and Jim were less fortunate, their potion resulting in a thick black sludge that melted out the bottom of their cauldron. Finally, as everyone filed out, Harry told Hermione, Neville and Theo to head on without him as he had a personal matter to attend to.

When everyone else was gone, Snape looked up from his notes to see that Harry was still there.

"Class is over, Mr. Potter."

"I know sir. But I would like the opportunity to discuss some ... house matters with you. If right now isn't good, I would

be happy to come back at some more convenient time. But I think it's important that we address with this immediately rather than just let things ... fester."

Snape snorted. "I was right. You are just as arrogant as your father and brother."

"Not at all. Before this summer, I literally didn't even know James Potter was alive or that I even had a brother. And I haven't learned anything since then to give me the slightest regard for him. I gather based on things he's said in our brief conversations that he bullied you when you were at school together. And I can see that he raised Jim to be an arrogant bully as well. But he didn't raise me. And I don't want to spend the next seven years feeling as though my head of house was an enemy just because he *thinks* he has grounds for hating my birth-father."

"I don't *think* anything of the sort, Potter!" spat the older man. "I *know* I have reasons to hate him."

"With respect sir, you really don't," said Harry with an eerie calm.

"Explain yourself!" Snape snarled.

"Harry Hunting."

Snape blinked in confusion at the odd expression. "What?"

"Harry Hunting. It's a game my cousin Dudley and his friends invented. They'd count to ten to give me a head start. And then they'd run after me. And if they caught me, they'd knock me to the ground and kick me until they got bored. They started playing it when I was six."

Snape said nothing, so Harry continued.

"In the summers, they had a special variation. Dudley's Aunt Marge would come to stay with us. She raised dogs and always came with a pit bull named Ripper. Instead of chasing me themselves, they'd just sic the dog on me. I have a bite mark I can show you from when I was seven and it got me before I was tall enough and fast enough to climb trees. From the age of about four, I cooked for the Dursleys, cleaned for them, did yard work for them. Sometimes, the Dursleys deliberately spilled things on the floor because I was done with my chores and they didn't want me to have any free time. At nights, I slept in a boot cupboard. My medical records include one broken arm, a fractured clavicle, and at least four cracked ribs. Until I started primary school at the age of six, I *literally* thought my name was 'freak' because that's what everyone called me. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had to sit me down the night before primary school started and explain that *other people* would call me 'Harry Potter' so I shouldn't act surprised by it, but in their house, I shouldn't expect to be called anything but 'freak' or 'boy.' And as near as I can tell, all of that happened to me simply because James Potter and Lily Potter and Albus Dumbledore thought keeping me around was *inconvenient* and would complicate the more important task of raising the Boy-Who-Lived into the wonderful specimen of humanity he is today."

Harry stood and picked up his book bag. "I haven't told you any of this because I expect pity. And certainly not because I expect you to do anything about it. I've never met a grown-up who did anything to help me in any way. But I want you to understand one thing: You. Have. No. *Idea*. About what it means to *hate* James Potter." Then, he walked to the door and opened it. "Until next class, sir."

"Potter!" The boy turned back. Snape hesitated ... and then sneered at him. "Your hair looks ridiculous. Like some lazy

Gryffindor who just rolled out of bed. Get it taken care of before you embarrass your house any more with it."

Harry nodded curtly, and then he was gone. Snape stared at the door for a long time. "Oh, Lily," he whispered, "what have you done?"

Later, while Harry was at lunch, Hedwig flew in bearing a thick, legal-sized envelope. Eagerly, Harry tore into it and pulled out several parchments over which he started poring, absently eating a sandwich as he read.

"What's that, Potter?" asked Draco.

"Some documents from my solicitor. Speaking of which, please remind me to send your parents a thank-you note. They were quite helpful."

"My pleasure." Draco turned then as the Gryffindors came into lunch late. Some were chatting amiably while others looked upset, and the youngest Weasel looked absolutely murderous. On the other hand, the eldest (and most boring) Weasel looked just as angry but it was focused on his youngest sibling. Then, Draco noticed that Jim wasn't with the rest of his House. Turning to the Head Table, he noticed Snape entering late but with a satisfied look on his face. Neither Dumbledore nor McGonagall nor Lily Potter were there.

Draco pointed out their absence to Harry who just crooked an eyebrow and said "Interesting."

"That's not the only *interesting* thing, Potter," said a Third Year. "I heard that your dad apparated in just before lunch. All the Potters together ... except you of course." The boy laughed rudely as Harry frowned at the reference to his

"dad." Then, he straightened up with an excited look in his eye.

"James Potter is here? Where is he?" said Harry excitedly.

"After that spectacle his son – the other one – made in Potions class, I imagine he's in the Headmaster's office with McGonagall, Professor Potter and Junior," said Draco. "Why do you care? I didn't think you'd want to see any of the Potters, and after Monday, I wouldn't think he'd want to see you."

Harry began sifting through the documents from his solicitor until he found a rolled-up grey parchment which he pocketed. Then, he stuffed everything else into his book bag.

"What he wants is irrelevant, Mr. Malfoy. All that matters is what he deserves. Total war, remember?"

With that, Harry practically ran out of the Great Hall and to the gargoyles that stood at the entrance to the Headmaster's Office. Once there, he sat down, collected himself, and waited. About fifteen minutes later, the gargoyles slid aside, and the Potters came through the doorway. As soon as he saw Harry, James' face darkened, as did Jim's.

"What do you want?" hissed Jim.

"Nothing from you, Little Brother." Harry whipped out the scroll with a flourish and handed it to his father, who snatched it up and unrolled it. Then, his eyes widened.

"You've filed ... an *injunction*! Against either Lily or myself interfering with your schooling or your inheritance? Or even speaking to you without your head of house present? You mean *Snivellus*?! Why you little bastard!"

"James!" said Lily angrily.

"You should listen to her, Father. After all, you just slandered her and your other son as well as me with that remark. You know, I'd planned on giving that to mother and owling you a copy, but seeing your face in person makes it a thousand times better."

"Do you really think you're going to accomplish anything with this little stunt?" said James. "In case you've forgotten, Dumbledore is the Chief Warlock! He'll never let this stand."

"Oh, I haven't forgotten. Since you broke the seal and read the title, that alerted my solicitor that process has been served. As we speak, he's filing a motion to force Dumbledore to recuse himself from any legal actions involving our family because of his conflict of interest. After all, Father, you yourself told me that it was his idea to have me shipped off to the Dursleys for ten years."

"Harry," Lily interrupted, "I know you're upset about that, and I don't blame you. But isn't this a little extreme?"

"Oh, hello, *Mother*. It's so nice to hear you actually speak to me for a change instead of ignoring me from across the Great Hall. And, no, this isn't extreme. Threatening me in front of several hundred witnesses to snap my wand is extreme. Promising to have me shipped off to be beaten and abused by *your filthy relatives* and to *illegally* disinherit me is extreme. And doing all that just because I was sorted into a house my father dislikes? The same one that his boss, Rufus Scrimgeour, was once in? *That's* definitely extreme. This? This is just rational self-interest." He turned and walked away, calling back as he went. "Enjoy your weekend, Potters. I know I will."

And once again he smiled.

Chapter End Notes

AN: The idea for the WBWL making an ass of himself in the first Potions class before being called out by a furious Hermione was something I first saw in a fanfic (apparently abandoned since 2013) called "The Warlock of Slytherin" by Romantic Silence. The circumstances and fallout are different here, but I always loved that idea of Hermione winning points from Snape for successfully shutting up James Potter's obnoxious brat.

Meanwhile, in the Lion

CHAPTER EIGHT: Meanwhile, In the Lions' Den

After leaving the Potters standing slack-jawed in front of the Headmaster's office, Harry sauntered into the Library looking for Hermione, who had invited him earlier to join her study group. Also in attendance were Neville and several other Gryffs clustered around Hermione like she was royalty. On the way in, Harry crossed paths with Theo, and he asked the boy to join them. Theo just looked back at the table (making eye contact with Hermione as he did). Then, he whispered a quick "*no*" and rushed out of the Library.

Shaking his head, Harry walked over to Hermione's table and introduced himself to the other Gryffindors: Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown and Dean Thomas. "I must say, I didn't expect this many people. I thought it was just three of us."

"Let's just say Hermione's popularity has skyrocketed in the last few hours," said Parvati smugly.

"Oh, stop!" said Hermione, blushing madly. "Now that the adrenaline's worn off, I feel quite embarrassed about the whole thing!"

"Well don't be!" said Neville. "You were incredible! That was what Gryffindor bravery is supposed to be about, not acting like ... *like a braying ass*." The other Gryff's laughed at that, until Madame Pince loudly shushed them all.

"What? For calling Jim out in Potions?" asked Harry.

"Oh, that was just the start. At some point, Harry, I'm going to borrow my Gran's pensieve just so you can watch the memory, because I'm going to treasure it forever," said Neville. "It all happened like this..."

Three hours earlier...

After the horrors of the first Potions class had ended, the First Year Gryffindors returned to their tower with mixed emotions. For Jim Potter, the dominant emotion was anger.

"Granger!" he bellowed as soon as he was through the passageway. "Gryffindors are supposed to stick together! What the hell do you mean by calling me a 'braying ass' in front of the whole class? And in Snivellus's class at that!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Potter," she said sweetly. "I'm only a humble Muggleborn still in awe of the wonders of the magical world. And when I see a braying ass magically disguised as a Hogwarts student, I CAN'T HELP POINTING IT OUT!"

"Why you little...! What were you so upset about anyway?! It's just house points! Nobody here cares about that except Little Miss Know-It-All!"

Hermione's eyes flashed dangerously, and she whipped out her wand. Startled, Jim fumbled for his own, but Hermione simply turned and walked to the stairs leading up to the dorms. There, she pointed her wand up each staircase and, to everyone's astonishment, shot off a series of loud popping fireworks before yelling "ALL PREFECTS TO THE COMMON ROOM FOR AN EMERGENCY MEETING!"

Seconds later, dozens of older Lions, including all six prefects were pouring into the room, where an angry

Hermione Granger was standing atop a coffee table surrounded by the rest of the First Years who were staring at her in amazement. She still had her wand out and looked ready for battle.

Ralph MacMillan, the 7th Year prefect, was the first to speak. "What the HELL is going on down here?! Who called a prefects meeting?!"

"I did," said Hermione calmly. "You lot said if we have any questions, then we should ask a prefect! Well I have a question, and I want it answered right now!"

"Have you gone completely **mental**?!" exclaimed Ralph before a female prefect, Emily Rossen, put her hand on his arm.

"Easy, Ralph. Let me. Miss Granger, er, Hermione. You're obviously distraught. Why don't you put your wand away and step down off the table and we can talk about this?"

"Not until I've asked my question."

Emily took a deep breath. "Okay, then. What's your question?"

"The House Cup. Is it something Gryffindor House actually cares about? Something that we actually aspire to win? Or is it just a big joke that only 'Know-It-Alls' worry about? Something we should just laugh over whenever some idiot costs us dozens of house points at one go? Because if it's the latter, I promise you I can stop caring about the House Cup too! It will be a lot easier to pass my OWLS if I'm not dragging a lot of **dead weight** behind me!"

Hermione glared at Jim and Ron at the end, but Percy Weasley missed that and whirled around on his twin

brothers instead. "Oh Merlin's pants, what have you idiots done now?!"

In unison, the twins put their hands up in a surrender gesture.

"Twasn't us, oh Perfect Prefect Percy." "We haven't lost any house points ... yet." "Haven't had time to do anything worth memorializing." "I mean, we did steal a toilet seat, but I don't think anyone's noticed yet."

"We've noticed," said Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet, almost in unison and with obvious displeasure.

Neville interrupted the discussion. "It wasn't the twins, Percy. It was Jim."

"Oh, thanks a lot, *traitor*," snapped Jim.

Hermione stepped down from the table and walked over to the confused prefects. "I don't know how things are going for the upper years. But among the First Years, it has taken Neville, Parvati, Lavender and myself a week to make up for the twenty points Jim Potter cost us on his first morning as a student."

Ralph coughed at that. "Yes, well. Admittedly that was a bad start for Potter, but hopefully, it's given him something to think about and won't happen..."

"Jim just lost us thirty-five points in Potions," she said calmly.

The room went quiet and all six prefects stared wide-eyed at the Boy-Who-Lived, who swallowed hard at attention that, for once, was not as favorable as he was accustomed. Then, the assembled Lions began murmuring their discontent. The twins were incorrigible, but a thirty-five

point loss was what they might post in a week, not a single class. It represented nearly half the points the entire house had earned in the first week of school.

"Thirty-five points... in one class," said Emily weakly.

"Actually," said Neville tiredly. "Thirty-five points in under a minute."

"... **HOW!**" shrieked another of the prefects.

Lavender spoke up. She'd been very proud of those two points that she'd won in Charms the day before. The fact that Hermione not only remembered it at all but considered it just as important as the dozen or so the Muggleborn had won by herself instantly endeared her to the other girl.

"Well, first of all, he mocked Professor Snape for his grooming habits to his face. Then, he went on a tear about how his father and Professor Snape hated one another and so his father basically told him it was okay to be disrespectful to the Professor. Then, he called Professor Snape 'Snivellus.' Did I forget anything?"

"Well," said Hermione, "it was patently obvious that Jim hadn't done the assigned reading, but that seems almost ... pedestrian after everything else."

"Of course," joined in Neville, "I'm sure he'd have carried on for longer and lost even more points had you not shut him up." He turned to the prefects. "For which she won us five points back, by the way."

Ralph waved that off and turned to Jim. "Why ... in Merlin's name, why would you deliberately insult a Hogwarts professor on the first day of class?"

Jim stiffened and looked around. He was dismayed and angry that most of the house seemed to be against him. "Because I shouldn't have to put up with abuse from someone who's had it out for my family since before I was born. I shouldn't have to be embarrassed with obscure questions no First Year would know."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Show of hands, please. Are there any other First Years who didn't know the answer to at least *one* of Professor Snape's questions?"

"I knew all three." "I knew two but didn't know the bezoar one." "Really? It was highlighted in bold in the side bar on page 3." "Oh! Darn it! I always forget to read the sidebars." Other than Ron, it appeared that all of the First Year Gryffindors knew the answer to at least one of Snape's questions. Finally, Jim snapped.

"SHUT UP, ALL OF YOU! I SHOULDN'T BE TREATED LIKE THIS! I'M..."

"The Boy-Who-Lived! Yes, we know," finished Hermione. "Harry was right about you with what he said last Monday. You really do think that the rules don't apply to you."

Jim blinked rapidly. Hermione almost started to feel bad seeing him on the verge of tears. Almost.

"I destroyed You-Know-Who! That should mean something!"

Hermione stepped forward to look Jim straight in the eye. "How?" she asked simply.

"Wh-what?"

"How did you destroy You-Know-Who? I've read several books about the last war. They all just say You-Know-Who

broke into your house, stunned your parents, and then tried to use the Killing Curse on you when you somehow 'vanquished' him. How did you do it?"

Jim stared at her, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

"You don't know, do you?" she continued. "You've been internationally famous and universally beloved for something that happened when you were a baby, and you have no idea how it was accomplished. For all anyone knows, it could have been nothing but a magical fluke, but you expect to be treated like royalty for it." She shook her head and turned towards the stairs to her dorm room. At the edge, she suddenly whirled back around and smiled.

"You know, I just had the *funniest* notion! Wouldn't it be amusing if, for all this time, it had been Harry who destroyed You-Know-Who? And the reason your parents sent him to his Muggle relatives was to keep him hidden away while they put you forward and made you famous just to hide the fact that Harry was the real Boy-Who-Lived?"

As she spoke, Jim's face twisted into a mask of rage, and with a vicious snarl, he pulled out his wand. But before he could cast a spell, he was grappled by two older Gryffindors. That didn't stop him from screaming in a rage, though. "**SHUT UP! SHUT YOUR FILTHY MUDBLOOD MOUTH!**"

There were audible gasps around the room. Neville took an involuntary step towards Jim as if to strike him, but Hermione called his name sharply and he stopped, his fists still clenched. "Mudblood, Potter?" Hermione repeated. "I wonder what your mother would say to that. Perhaps we should ask her." She turned her head, and the rest of the room followed her gaze to the entryway in the far wall ...

where Professors Potter and McGonagall stood completely aghast at the scene before them.

"Mu-Mum?" Jim asked.

"Not. One. Word. Come over here. Right now." Lily spoke quietly but with a frightening intensity. Slowly, Jim walked over to his mother, wiping his nose on the sleeve of his robe as he went. She placed her arm firmly around the boy's shoulders and guided him out of the common room. After they were gone, McGonagall exhaled slowly before turning to her Lions.

"I will not deduct any more points for what I have just witnessed. Mr. Potter will, instead, be serving detentions with me for the next week. Miss Granger? As I understand it, this marks the second time today you have stood up to one of the most famous and revered figures in our society and chastised him for his atrocious conduct. That is two times you have done what is right rather than what is easy. Professor Snape has already awarded you five points for the first instance, and I will match it for the second."

McGonagall surveyed the room. "I don't know what each of you thinks, but I for one wish very much to win the House Cup. It saddens me to think that any of my Lions lack sufficient pride in their house to share that wish. But while I cannot make you care, I assure you, I can make life difficult for you if you undermine others who do. Henceforth, any point deductions from a single individual in excess of five points in a day will be accompanied by detention, as well as any point deductions caused by willful defiance of or disrespect towards a Hogwarts teacher. Am I understood?" The chastened crowd indicated that she was. "Good. Carry on."

Three hours and ten minutes later...

Harry stared slack-jawed at Hermione as Neville finished his tale. No wonder Jim had seemed so subdued as he left the Headmaster's office. "I hope you won't think it forward of me, Hermione, but will you marry me?"

"Back off, Potter," said Neville with mock gruffness. "I saw her first."

Study Sessions

CHAPTER NINE : Study Sessions

Harry stared slack-jawed at Hermione as Neville finished his tale. No wonder Jim had seemed so subdued as he left the Headmaster's office. "I hope you won't think it forward of me, Hermione, but will you marry me?"

"Back off, Potter," said Neville with mock gruffness. "I saw her first."

Harry, Neville and the other children laughed while Hermione blushed once more, but with a smile. Then, they set to work. For the first thirty minutes, Hermione led a review of their Transfiguration homework. Everyone had been impressed when she'd accomplished the feat of transfiguring her matchstick into a needle on the first day. But when she explained her thought processes as they applied to McGonagall's methods, several of the others quickly made the same cognitive leap. Harry was able to transfigure a matchstick as well as Hermione after just a few minutes, while all the others save Neville made significant improvement. The boy was somewhat dejected by that, as Hermione was certain his wand movements were correct, but he was still unable to do more than make the matchstick a little silvery in hue.

Shaking off his frustration, Neville took over the session next, answering everyone's Herbology questions with ease. Then came Harry, who apparently was the only one capable of deciphering Quirrell's awful stutter into coherent notes. Harry and Hermione jointly covered Charms, and then, to Harry's surprise, Lavender Brown led the discussion on Potions. Apparently, despite her flighty personality, she

came from a long line of Potions masters, and her family held the patents on several cosmetics-related potions and also the valuable European concession on some Asian hair-care product called Sleekeazy. Remembering Snape's final words that morning, Potter resolved to ask her about it later.

After two grueling hours, the group broke up, but everyone seemed interested in continuing to meet again on Tuesdays and Fridays for the foreseeable future. Harry, Neville and Hermione stayed behind to chat after the others had left.

"That went rather well," said Hermione. "Do you think this group is the right size? Or should we try to add anyone else?"

"We can go a little bigger if we have the right people," said Harry. "Anthony Goldstein is good in Astronomy. Apparently, his dad is a Muggle astronomy professor. There's a Puff named Finch-Fletchley who is fascinated with wizarding history and actually stays awake in Binn's classes. Personally, I'd like to add Susan Bones, but that's for political networking reasons, so don't think you have to let her in just to appease my evil Slytherin ways."

Neville rolled his eyes. "No Slytherins to add then? And I guess I should ask – is it going to cause problems for you to study with us?"

He shook his head. "I'm Heir Presumptive of an important house. I'm in a wonderfully antagonistic relationship with the Boy-Who-Lived. And I've been cultivating a reputation as an eccentric loner. It shouldn't be a problem. But it's unlikely any other Slytherins will join us. At least not unless we start trouncing them in class work."

Hermione hesitated before asking. "Is ... is it because a ... a Mudblood is leading the group?"

Harry sighed. "Well, I wouldn't use that word, but yes, probably. There aren't any Muggleborns in Slytherin at all, not unless one of the Halfbloods is running a spectacular bluff. There are two Halfbloods in our year besides myself – Davis and Bulstrode – and a Pureblood whose family never served You-Know-Who, but I don't think any of them will risk alienating the older Purebloods, many of whom are openly bigoted. And, to be blunt about it, yes, Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson would probably call you a Mudblood to your face if no teachers were around. Crabbe and Goyle are basically appendages to Malfoy and will follow his lead. And honestly, I still have no idea about Zabini. He just floats around like some kind of social ninja."

"What's a ninja?" asked a perplexed Neville.

Harry started to answer and then paused looking equally perplexed. "You know, it's funny, but I actually have no idea how to explain ninjas to someone who's never seen a Muggle movie or television show! Let's just say a really mysterious sneaky person and leave it at that."

"And Nott?" asked Hermione. "I saw your exchange with him before you came over. When he looked at me, he didn't seem ... hateful. More like sad than anything else."

"Theo's ... a special case. I'm still working on him." He hesitated. "I don't want to start any unfounded rumors, so I'd appreciate it if you keep this to yourself. But I'm afraid that if it got back to Theo's father that he'd been hanging out with Muggleborns and 'blood traitors,'" Harry made air quotes around those words, "he might face ... physical consequences."

Neville shook his head while Hermione gasped. "Surely not! I thought heirs of Pureblood families were protected from things like that."

"*Presumptive* Heirs, Hermione," replied Neville. "Nott has an older brother at Durmstrang. That means Theo's not the Heir Presumptive, so he doesn't really have much protection from his father. I can sympathize." The boy hesitated and looked slightly pained. "I've never told anyone this, but when I was younger, my great-uncle Algie ... sort of ... tried to kill me. Twice."

Harry's eyes goggled at that, while Hermione looked concerned. "You said at the Welcoming Feast that when you were eight, your uncle accidentally dropped you out of a window and you bounced," she said.

"Yeah," he said somewhat bitterly. "And before that, there was that time 'accidentally' he knocked me off Blackpool Pier. I nearly drowned before he fished me out. Officially... well, officially, they were both accidents. Unofficially, it was understood that he was trying to scare me into using accidental magic. I told that story at the Feast because everyone was telling amusing tales about how they found out they were magical, and I got nervous and told the only one I had. But I've always wondered about it because as it turns, if I'd actually died, Uncle Algie would have gone from just being my regent until I turn fifteen to inheriting the whole estate outright."

"And no one considered prosecuting him for attempted murder?" asked Harry.

"What's to prosecute? It's basically legal to deliberately endanger a child from a Wizengamot family if it's for purposes of provoking accidental magic, provided there's

been no sign of it before and the child's at least four years old." He hesitated. "Sometimes, I wonder if that's why my magic is so weak. My parents were both powerful wizards, but I almost never had accidental magic and, well, I'm struggling in all my wand-magic classes. I wonder if there was some trauma related to what he did to me that stunted my magical development."

"That's awful!" exclaimed Hermione, earning another hiss from Madame Pince. "Do you mean to tell me I've entered a culture where it's acceptable to endanger children just to make them demonstrate magic? That's barbaric!"

"To be fair, there is a Wizarding Child Services department in the Ministry that looks after the health and welfare of Muggleborn, Halfbloods, and even Purebloods of 'lesser' families. It's just barred by law from questioning the treatment of children who are from Wizengamot families but who aren't established as Heirs Presumptive, which I wasn't until my magic saved me from that fall. From what I can tell, I was kind of an unusual case because most wizarding children show some sign of magic in early childhood. Anyway, our system of government depends on keeping as many Wizengamot seats filled as possible, especially Ancient and Noble seats. As far as the law is concerned, if I'd been a squib, it would have been better for me to have died young so that the Longbottom seat could more quickly pass to an actual wizard. Honestly, you as a Muggleborn have a lot more legal protections than Theodore Nott. He could be kicked out onto the street tomorrow or worse on his father's whim."

"You can see now, Hermione, why I've been studying this stuff like mad," said Harry. "By leaving me with the Dursleys and not looking after me, the Potters and the Headmaster violated several centuries-old laws." He turned back to

Neville. "And not to change the subject, but you seem rather well-informed about Theo's home life."

"I can make some educated guesses." Neville looked around the Library to make sure they were not being observed. "Last summer, Gran made me study files she'd had drawn up on all the children I'd be at Hogwarts with whose parents were either known or suspected Death Eaters. She has a personal grudge against the Malfoys for what the Lestranges did to my parents, but as far as specific crimes, Lucius Malfoy wasn't even that bad. He was accused of bribery, financially supporting a terrorist group, and misdemeanor Muggle-baiting. If he took the Dark Mark of his own free will rather than while under the Imperius Curse, then he probably murdered at least one Muggle, but that's basically unprovable. He's an arrogant bigoted snob, but compared to most suspected Death Eaters, he's relatively harmless."

Neville leaned forward intently. "Tiberius Nott, on the other hand, was accused of all that plus murdering a dozen Muggleborns and Merlin knows how many Muggles. The killings usually were, well, extremely violent. Gran called him a psychopath and said he was probably the worst Death Eater to not get put into Azkaban."

"Why wasn't he if he was that bad?" hissed an astonished Hermione.

"You can thank Sirius Black. His trial transcripts are still sealed, but according to the information that was released to the press, he confessed to putting over two dozen Wizengamot members under the Imperius for You-Know-Who, including Malfoy, Goyle, Crabbe, Parkinson ... and Nott. That got all of them off the hook in spite of them carrying Dark Marks. Gran figures Black knew he was done

for, so he took the blame for all the suspected Death Eaters who hadn't been caught red-handed."

"Is it possible to see those press accounts?" asked Harry.

Hermione pointed across the room to an upper floor.
"They've got bound copies of The Prophet doing back decades at least."

Harry nodded. That would be something else to add to his studies, which already included his normal class work, Wizengamot law, and wizarding genealogy. "You know, Neville, if you're really worried that there's some kind of childhood trauma that might be limiting your magic, you should go see Madame Pomfrey. Perhaps it's something correctable. I've already talked to her about my size – the Dursleys weren't big on nutrition where I was concerned – and the nutrient potions she gave me are supposed to get me up to Jim's height within a year or two."

"I'll ... think about it. Thanks."

After some more discussion of school matters, the trio separated, with Hermione and Neville headed back to their dorm and Harry to the back issues of The Prophet, starting with the volume for 1981. The results were unenlightening. You-Know-Who's death was front page on November 1st of 1981, and two days later, the paper officially attributed his demise to "*Jim Potter, The Boy-Who-Lived*" even though there were no actual first hand witnesses for his miraculous feat of deflecting the Killing Curse. Nevertheless, it was just ... accepted that Voldemort had tried to use the Killing Curse on Jim and some strange backlash destroyed him, leaving Jim with the Dark Lord's mark on his brow. Harry idly wondered if the V-shaped scar might actually contain some fragment of Voldemort's evil, thereby explaining why

the Boy-Who-Lived should be such a monumental prat. Then, he disregarded the idea. Voldemort might be evil, but Harry thought he'd be much smarter and less obnoxious than Jim. Harry was unsurprised to see that there had been no mention of his status or even his existence.

The traitor Sirius Black was arrested on 3 November, 1981 by James Potter himself. He was tried by a secret tribunal in accordance with what were referred to as The Death Eater Laws, a series of controversial temporary laws passed in 1980 to better allow the wizarding law enforcement and judicial systems to cope with what was effectively an armed insurrection by a substantial part of the nation's ruling class. Given the influence Voldemort had, Harry wondered why he didn't just have his followers pass laws to give him what he wanted rather than going on mass killing sprees.

The Death Eater Laws were most infamous for sanctioning the use of the Unforgivable Curses by aurors and hit-wizards against Death Eaters, but they also had provisions for secret trials, as opposed to normal criminal trials in which a quorum of the Wizengamot serves as jury. The transcripts of these tribunals were sealed to the general public, and even the aurors who stood guard over accused prisoners had to submit to Memory Charms after each trial so that they couldn't reveal the identities of any participants. Ostensibly, this was to prevent the names of witnesses and judges from being revealed publically and thus allowing Death Eaters to seek revenge. Apparently, before that law was enacted, several judges who had presided over successful Death Eater trials had later been murdered. The article on Sirius Black's trial merely said that the trial transcript had been magically certified by the Court Scribe and that the trial had been presided over by three of the twelve anonymous Wizengamot members who were eligible to sit as judges in criminal proceedings (and

who had all sworn magical oaths to fairly adjudicate such proceedings). Those three anonymous judges would decide Black's fate.

The evidence against Sirius Black consisted of sworn affidavits from James and Lily Potter that he had been their secret keeper, a sworn statement from an Unspeakable (whatever that was – Harry added the term to his long list of things to research) giving expert testimony that a Fidelius Charm could only be penetrated if the secret keeper voluntarily revealed it, and a lengthy confession from Black in which he proudly admitted to being secret Death Eater, to betraying the Potters, and to placing a number of influential Wizengamot figures under the Imperius Curse. Nothing more except his sentence – a lifetime in Azkaban for his repeated use of an Unforgiveable. Ironically, his betrayal of the Potters wasn't even a major part of his sentence since no one actually died as a result of those actions. Having learned all he could about the fall of Voldemort, Harry returned the book and went back to his genealogy research. After an hour of making notes, he prepared another letter to his solicitor and sent it off with Hedwig before heading off to dinner.

The following weekend, Harry discovered the most immediate and tangible benefit of his involvement with Hermione's study group. Harry had approached Lavender Brown with some embarrassment over the topic of wizarding hair care products, but she eagerly took him in hand and answered all of his questions. On Sunday afternoon, Lavender and Parvati performed a "make-over" on him in an unused classroom and introduced the young Slytherin to the wonders of Sleekeazy. When he entered the Great Hall on the following Monday morning, it was with the first perfect coif of his entire life. Jim laughed at him, but Snape and Draco nodded approvingly. Greengrass and

Davis were also quite impressed and asked him to call them Daphne and Tracie, respectively.

By the following Tuesday, Hermione's study group had indeed grown. Justin Finch-Fletchley and Susan Bones joined, as did Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil, though she made a point of sitting as far away from her twin as possible. Harry wondered whether magical twins ran hot or cold – either practically sharing a brain like the Weasley Twins or else at each others throats like the Patils or the Potters. Harry remained the only Slytherin who wanted anything to do with the group, which was perhaps for the best, as the group split its time between studying course material and discussing the relative merits of Muggle and wizarding cultures. The Muggleborn and Muggle-raised were learning loads about the wizarding world while the Purebloods were learning that a lot of their assumptions about Muggles were wildly incorrect. All of the them were greatly improving their magical skill, though Neville was becoming frustrated by his lack of progress in his wandwork.

The second session also answered a question that baffled Hermione since school had started – what was early education like for wizarding children? She realized quickly that there were no wizarding primary schools, yet all of her Pureblood and Halfblood classmates seemed able read and write several years above their age level compared to Muggles. Not compared to *her*, of course, but she was surprised at how effective magical home-schooling seemed to be. The answer, of course, was magic.

Anthony Goldstein, a Halfblood who'd lived abroad for several years, explained to the Muggle-raised in the group about "educational potions" and how they worked. An educational potion was, as the name implied, a potion that

instantly tutored the drinker in some field of study. The number and scope of these educational potions was rather limited, as they were difficult and expensive to produce. It was easiest to create potions that taught languages, and students who took Ancient Runes in Third Year would start off with a regimen of potions that would instantly give them fluency in Elder and Younger Futhark, with more obscure runic languages coming later. Anthony had taken a potion at the age of seven that taught him German when his father had accepted a teaching position at the University of Hamburg. He said it tasted nasty and gave him a headache that lasted for a day, but when he woke up the next morning, he was completely fluent in German, albeit with a 19th century Prussian accent.

Wizarding Child Services provided a few free educational potions to all British Pureblood and Halfblood children beginning at age six so that by the time they reached Hogwarts, those children could read, write, and perform basic arithmetic on a level comparable to a fairly smart Muggle child who had completed his first year of secondary school. Understandably, the Muggle-raised children were annoyed to learn that they'd spent six years attending Muggle primary school when the same benefits could be obtained in a few days with the appropriate potions, but Anthony explained that there were some sizeable gaps in the potions' utility and availability. For example, there was a potion that covered basic arithmetic, but most wizards seemed completely unaware of higher Muggle maths like algebra and calculus or, for that matter, entire maths-dependent fields like engineering and architecture. After all, who needs an engineer to design a building when you can transfigure raw materials as you like and then magically reinforce it no matter how structurally unsound it was. Arithmancy, a Third Year elective, introduced elements of geometry and trigonometry but only to the extent

relevant to the magical implications of the maths involved. There were also potions for literacy that taught wizarding children to read and write at the level of an 8th Year Muggle secondary student, but the vocabulary and syntax hadn't been updated in over a century, which was why Pureblood children who didn't socialize much had such oddly formal speech patterns.

Any potions other than the ones for literacy and numeracy had to be purchased privately and at significant cost. There were lots of options for language potions, but only a few for natural sciences. The most popular one, designed for people who wanted to pursue studies in alchemy, gave the drinker a complete understanding of the field of Muggle chemistry ... as it was understood in 1893. The physics potion was so out of date that it was actually counterproductive, leading the unwary drinker to think that fires were caused by burning phlogiston and that vacuums were actually full of ether. There were few potions for Wizarding history, and none at all for Muggle Studies – Susan Bones, whose guardian was a high-ranking Ministry official, did not know who the current British monarch was, and none of the Purebloods had a clue how Parliament worked. Finally, it was apparently impossible to brew a potion that conferred practical knowledge of any facet of actual magic, even topics as seemingly mundane as Herbology or Care of Magical Creatures, which was why Hogwarts' existence was still necessary. The prevailing explanation for this gap was that "*Merlin did something and so we can't make potions that teach magic.*"

Understandably, both Harry and Hermione found that explanation completely unsatisfactory.

Flights and Duels

CHAPTER TEN : Flights and Duels

12 September 1991

As Harry headed down for breakfast, he wondered if he'd need an extra dose of Sleakeasy to get through the day, for today was to be the much-anticipated start of flying lessons. Naturally, the Slytherins and Gryffindors were grouped together, so it was probably going to end in tears. And sure enough, the day got off to a poor start when Malfoy and his lackeys inexplicably picked a fight with the Gryffindors at breakfast, one quickly broken up by Professor McGonagall. When they came over to the Slytherin table, Harry asked what that had been about. Malfoy was evasive, but Goyle blurted out that they were mocking Longbottom because his grandmother had sent him a Rememberall as a present.

"And what's a Rememberall when it's at home?" asked Harry.

"It's a globe that turns red when you've forgotten something important," replied Draco blandly as he buttered some toast.

"Hmm. I suppose that could be useful," replied Harry.

"Not really. Besides, Longbottom's is huge and ancient and ugly and looks to be made of cheap glass. He'll probably break it by the end of the week."

"I thought you'd gotten over your issues with Neville."

"I don't have 'issues,' Potter. But your brother hasn't done anything obnoxious in a week, so I've gone back to having equal disdain for all Gryffindors."

Harry shook his head and went back to his Daily Prophet. He hoped the rest of the day would be less dramatic.

Ten hours later ...

Harry's hopes had been in vain. That evening, Draco sat down for dinner across from him, and Harry just looked at the other boy in furious consternation. Finally, Draco noticed he was being stared at intently.

"What?" he asked.

"And what, pray tell, was all *that* about?" asked Harry somewhat hotly.

"You'll have to be more specific, Potter. It was an eventful day."

"The bit where you insulted Longbottom when he wasn't there to defend himself, then you deliberately threatened to destroy Longbottom's Remember-thingy after he fell and got hurt, then you flew off with the Git in defiance of Madame Hooch's orders, and then tried to destroy the Remember-thingy, only for the Git to miraculously save it. Oh, and just now, you challenged the Git to - and I can't believe this is even a thing - *a wizard's duel?!'*"

"Yes. That all did happen. Do you want to be my second? The Weasel is seconding the Git."

"At a wizard's duel? It's not even October! What are you two going to do - transfigure matchsticks to needles and fling them at one another until somebody loses an eye?"

"You'll just have to come to the duel and watch. Meet me in the Trophy Room at midnight."

Harry's eyes narrowed as he studied Malfoy's smirking face. "You're not even going, are you? This is just a trick to get the Git and the Weasel out of bounds after curfew."

Draco laughed. "That's what I like about you, Potter. Despite your obvious deficiencies, you're still leagues ahead of your miserable brother."

"Well, I suppose that's what passes for a compliment in this house."

"Pfft. If you wanted compliments, Potter, you should have gone to the Puffs."

Harry snorted. "Well, hopefully, this has at least cured you of your strange obsession with Longbottom's Rememberall."

Draco sneered at him and then resumed eating. Theo eyed the whole exchange silently.

Later, as the Slytherins were returning to their dorms, Theo nudged Harry and whispered, "You should think about getting a Rememberall yourself if you can." And then he held out his hand to show a small orb that looked just like Neville's only about one-fourth the size. "Draco has one as well. They're more useful than you might think." Then, Theo moved on quickly leaving a perplexed Harry Potter behind.

13 September 1991

The next morning, Harry met with Hermione and Neville in the Library. They were supposed to meet up so that he could answer a few last minute DADA questions before that

morning's class. But now, instead, he was sitting in a padded chair rubbing his temples and listening as Hermione and Neville described their "*adventures*" from the night before.

"So let me get this straight," he said tiredly. "Jim and Ron decided to sneak out to participate in an illegal midnight wizarding duel which wasn't going to happen anyway because the whole thing was a trap to get Jim in trouble which I figured out in less than five seconds. And you went along because...?"

"Well, I wasn't planning on accompanying them, but I came out into the hall after them to tell them not to go, and then the Fat Lady wandered off somewhere and I was stuck anyway, so I thought it better to go along with them than just sit in the corridor by myself," said Hermione as if that was the most logical thing in the world.

"And they actually found me passed out on a bench nearby. I, ah, sort of forgot the password and fell asleep." And then, Neville muttered "*stupid Rememberall*" under his breath just barely loud enough for Harry to hear.

"So to continue," Harry said with some annoyance, "the four of you went to the Trophy Room, discovered that Malfoy never showed, almost got caught by Filch, and then decided the best thing to do was to go to the Third Floor Corridor of Certain Painful Death?"

"Well," Neville replied with a grin, "obviously the Headmaster's warnings of certain painful death were exaggerated since we did not, in fact, die or even suffer pain. But we did find a Cerberus! And we also learned that Jim has a very high pitched voice when he screams!" He laughed, and Hermione punched his shoulder in annoyance.

"We also learned that the Cerberus was sitting on top of a trap door," she added. "Obviously, something incredibly valuable is being hidden down there with a Cerberus to guard it. But what could it be?"

Harry looked back and forth between his two friends in wonderment. "A better question would be: *why on Earth do you care?* Dumbledore said to stay away because it was dangerous, and I take him at his word. How did you even get past the door?!"

"Alohamora. It's in Chapter 7 of Goshawk's **Standard Book of Spells for First Years.**"

Harry, who had already read that entire textbook from cover to cover, stared at her and then crooked an eyebrow suspiciously. "No it's not," he said firmly.

Neville looked at Hermione who was now blushing.

"Oh, alright! It was in Chapter 7 of the 1923 edition which I found in a used bookstore in Diagon Alley. It had a lot of wonderful spells that weren't in the current edition because they were deemed unsuitable for children to learn."

"Oh, that's a relief," said Neville. "Now, I don't feel so thick for having never heard of it."

"So to recap," said Harry acidly, "you were concerned about Jim and Ron doing something foolish, so you followed them out and then helped them break into an out-of-bounds area with an illegal lock-picking charm."

"It's not illegal, Harry, just ... frowned upon. Besides, they do teach it in upper year classes. You can't practice warding a door against the Alohamora if you don't know how to cast it."

"Ah, so you *can* ward the door leading to the deadly Cerberus against the Lock-Opening Charm that precocious First Years can cast, but the staff didn't bother to do so because ... you know, I don't even care anymore. I'll give myself a headache if I keep trying to apply common sense to this school."

Harry looked over at Neville, who seemed amused rather than embarrassed. "Wait a minute. You say you forgot the password to get into your dorm? I thought that Remember-whatsit was supposed to prevent that."

"Oh no. Apparently, it just turns red when I've forgotten something important, but it doesn't actually tell me what."

"That seems spectacularly unhelpful."

Neville stiffened. "It was a gift from my Gran. I don't care if Malfoy thinks it's stupid..."

"Easy, Neville. Draco was just being ... Draco. Besides, I'm reliably informed that he has one himself and was actually mocking you for yours being an antique. Apparently, the newer models are much smaller and sleeker. Probably a Scandinavian influence. I blame IKEA."

The other boy, on whom Harry's joke was completely lost, merely shrugged. "It's kind of a tradition for Longbottoms to reuse family heirlooms. That's why I'm using my dad's wand instead of a new one."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "You can do that? Just use a family member's wand? Mr. Ollivander must have made me try fifteen wands before we found the right one."

"And twice that number for me. He kept going on about how 'the wand chooses the wizard' and stuff like that."

Neville shrugged again, but Harry persisted. "Nev, I know you've been frustrated about how much trouble you've been having in classes, but it looks to me like you're doing *fine* in everything except wand-work. The book on wand lore I picked up at Ollivander's says that using a wand that's unsuited for you at best makes it hard to work magic and at worst can be physically dangerous. Is it possible that your wand isn't compatible and that's what's holding you back?

"It's my father's wand, Harry! He was a great wizard, and I want to be worthy of him!" exclaimed the boy, who was becoming upset. Pince shushed loudly from her desk, and Neville ducked his head.

Hermione patted his leg and said gently, "We know, Neville. But you're not a carbon copy of your father. Your mother was a great witch as well. And half of you comes from her. Was her wand made of the same materials as your father's?"

Neville closed his eyes. "I ... don't think so. I understand what you're saying. If ... if my wand work doesn't improve, I'll talk to Gran about getting a new one."

"Like you promised to talk to the nurse about your magic and your memory issues?" thought Harry, though he said nothing aloud.

"Well, I suppose we should head on down to breakfast before the Weasel eats it all. But both of you, please, stop trying to follow after Jim Potter and save him from himself. I understand the desire to stop Jim from costing you even more house points, but it's not worth the risk of you two getting into trouble or possibly even hurt." Harry shook his head. "By the way, I never heard. How many points did

McGonagall take yesterday after that broom nonsense with Jim and Draco?"

Neville and Hermione looked at each somewhat nervously.

"What?" asked Harry, suddenly apprehensive..

Thirty seconds later, after the trio had been kicked out of the Library because of Harry's yelling...

"*Unbelievable!* This place is absolutely unbelievable! A teacher says 'don't do this or you'll be expelled,' Jim Potter does that very thing a minute later, and not only is he not expelled, *he gets on the flipping house Quidditch team!* Bloody hell!"

"Language, Harry!" said Hermione.

"I bet he's the youngest Seeker in, what, twenty years? Thirty?"

Neville coughed. "A century."

"GAAAAAAH!"

"Harry, please. Think it through."

"Oh, by all means, Hermione, explain what rational reason there is for putting Jim Potter on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, other than McGonagall caring more about a stupid trophy than any pretense of school discipline!"

"*Professor* McGonagall, Harry," Hermione corrected. Harry actually sneered at that, which startled Neville. He was used to sneering Slytherins, but he'd never seen Harry do it before. He was surprisingly good at it.

"Listen, Harry," she continued. "Yes, this seems grossly unfair, but think about it from Professor McGonagall's point of view. They've been using sticks pretty hard with Jim to no avail, so they've decided to give him a really big carrot."

Neville looked back and forth between the two. "I have no idea what you're on about. *Carrot*? Is this like that 'ninja' thing from last week?"

Harry sighed. "It's a Muggle expression, Nev. To get a donkey to move you can either hit it on the behind with a stick or dangle a carrot in front of its face. It means that they obviously can't control Jim with detentions, let alone loss of house points, so they're giving him something he desperately wants – the status of being on the house Quidditch team – which they can then threaten to revoke if he acts out of line."

"Exactly," said Hermione. "And as an added bonus, the Gryffindor captain is a madman named Oliver Wood who has set up a truly grueling practice schedule – twelve hours a week. Possibly more as the first match draws near. We are playing you lot after all. That's twelve hours or more a week he'll be under the supervision of upper year students and kept out of mischief."

Harry took a deep breath and exhaled. It made sense. But that didn't mean he had to like it. "Fine. I hope the Git falls off his broom." The other two laughed. "I'm sorry I lost my temper. You to go on to breakfast. I need to use the facilities." The two Gryffindors said their goodbyes and headed on. Harry turned and walked the other way, pausing at the boy's lavatory door before looking back at his friends. Then, seeing that they weren't watching, he quickly darted past the bathroom before turning down a side corridor and into the empty classroom sometimes used for Care of

Magical Creatures. Checking quickly to see that no one else was there, he picked up a piece of chalk and threw it at a large painting of a sleeping ashwinder wrapped around its eggs.

"Esme! Esme! Wake up!" With a hiss, the fiery serpent raised its head and hissed at Harry, the corona of flame around its head lighting up the whole room. "I'm sorry for waking you, but this is important. What have the other snakes been saying about the locked room in the Third Floor corridor? You know, the one with the three-headed dog in it."

Halloween 1991 (Part 1)

CHAPTER 11: Halloween 1991 (Pt. 1)

31 October 1991

As the Slytherin First Years got ready for the day, Harry laid in his bed, deep in thought. Today was Halloween in the Muggle world. He supposed it was in the wizarding world too, but it was also Victory Day, the day Jim Potter vanquished You-Know-Who. Tonight's feast would likely be particularly impressive, since it was the Git's first year at Hogwarts. The "carrot" had apparently worked. Jim had not suffered any serious point losses since joining the Quidditch team and appeared to have buckled down on his studies.

"Appeared" being the operative word, of course. Now that he knew that tantrums would get him nowhere, Jim had become a bit more, well, Slytherin in his approach. He'd ingratiated himself with the Weasley Terrors (as the Slytherins dubbed the Twins), and good friends that they were, they'd taken to pranking the Snakes, and Harry in particular, with a vengeance. Particularly notable was the morning Harry spent forced to walk backwards everywhere, not to mention the two days that the entire First Year Slytherin class had been compelled to refer to each other as "Junior Death Eater" every time they spoke to one another. The twins rarely pranked Neville and Hermione out of house loyalty, but there was something of a cold war amongst the Gryffindor firsties, with Neville and the girls on one side and the rest of the boys on the other. Dean had even stopped coming to the study sessions.

Exacerbating things was the fact that Neville was still making no progress in his own wand work, yet he refused

to consult with his grandmother about the issue of his wand. He hadn't quit the study group, but he now barely even tried in Charms and Transfiguration. Naturally, this had resulted in him losing some points for lack of effort and, eventually, a Howler from his grandmother during lunch the previous week.

All of which suddenly made Harry's position in his own house a bit more precarious. He was doing well academically and still held the advantages of being the Potter Heir (though his solicitor advised that James Potter was *still* looking for grounds to disinherit him). But his reputation was no longer "mysterious eccentric loner" but rather "loser on the outs with his family whose only friends were other losers." Largely as a consequence, Daphne and Tracie had rather coolly advised him that they were back on a last name basis. So it was a somewhat downbeat Harry Potter who walked with his dorm mates to breakfast. Up ahead in front of the Great Hall, he noticed the Weasley Twins waiting and watching. Then, to his right, he heard a soft hiss from the tapestry depicting St. Patrick purging the snakes out of Ireland. Harry stopped... and then took a running jump to clear the group of floor tiles that the snake had warned were hexed.

"Potter, do stop acting like a Muggle fool," drawled Draco from just behind him. Then, there was a crackle of magic followed by cries of dismay. Harry turned around. Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle and Parkinson all now had hair the color of Gryffindor red with golden eyebrows to match.

"The Weasley Terrors," Harry said in a bored voice. "And fairly obvious this time. Do at least *try* to be aware of your surroundings, Malfoy. Now, I suggest you go to the infirmary before whatever that stuff is soaks in. That or you can look like lost Weasley cousins the rest of the week."

Draco snarled at Harry, and then he, his two bookends, and his ... whatever Pansy was stormed off to the infirmary. Daphne Greengrass sidled up to Harry and looked at him with curiosity.

"How did you know the Weasleys had put a trap there," she asked.

Harry shrugged and then lied. "Just something we losers figured out in our loser study group. I'm sure someone as clever as you would have figured out on your own. If not, you'd look lovely with bright red hair." She huffed and headed on to breakfast. Harry then turned and walked boldly in the Twins' direction, hoping that Egbert's memory and eye for detail were as good as he claimed (Egbert being the snake hanging from the tree in the background of a painting on the third floor who claimed to have overheard observed the Twins and picked up some juicy gossip from it). "Gentlemen, a moment of your time?"

The Twins, who had been both amazed and annoyed at how casually he'd evaded their prank, straightened up.

"Oh? And what might us two..." "Innocent little Gryffies ..."
"Want to say to..." "A mean little snake like you."

Harry sighed. Part of him wondered if he and Jim would have the same back and forth patter down if they'd lived together. Another part of him was suddenly grateful to the Dursleys for preventing just that outcome.

"Well, I'd like to try diplomacy for a start. Have I, in fact, done anything to anger you two or to deserve the somewhat aggressive level of pranking I've had to put up with for the last month? Because if so, I apologize and I'm happy to make amends. If not, of course, I'll have to assume the worst – that you two have simply agreed to become Jim's

attack dogs and come after me for no reason but his pettiness."

"Gryffindors stick together, little snakey Potter," said one of them with surprising coldness. So it had been Jim. Harry guessed that meant it was time for "the stick."

"Well, Slytherin's don't. So you can go after my house-mates to your hearts' content, but leave me out of it. Because ... well, I do apologize for making threats, it's really not my style ... but so help me, if one more hex or jinx or prank hits me and I think you to are responsible," he hesitated for emphasis as the Twins looked at him smugly, *"I'll tell Snape about The Map."*

That got their attention. And while the Twins were pretty good at acting innocent, they were not prepared for a First Year Slytherin threatening their most treasured secret. After a few seconds of eye-goggling, one of them ("The one with the tiny mole next to his left eye," Harry noted for future reference) finally said nervously, "W-What Map?"

"Oh, do you have more than one? The one I'm talking about is activated by ... oh what were the words? Something like 'I swear I'm up to no good.' No! 'I *solemnly* swear I'm up to no good.' That's how it goes, right?"

The Twins were even more shocked at that, and inwardly, Harry was singing Egbert's praises for his perception and memory. "Look, guys. I don't want to be your enemy. To be honest, I'm a fan of your work ... well, when it's not directed at me and when you don't cross the line from 'playful amusement' to 'cruel bullying.'" They actually looked a bit hurt at that, so Harry decided to offer the carrot as well. "In fact, I think if you had a bit of ... financial support, you could take your work to the next level."

Their eyebrows shot up and that, and the one without a mole asked, "Are you offering us a bribe to not prank you?"

Harry made a point of looking mildly offended. "I'll make you a deal. You don't call it a bribe and I won't call it paying protection money. A galleon a week. You leave me out of your pranks. If Jim asks you to prank me, tell him ... tell him that Snape has been looking out for me and it's too risky or something like that. And before you ask, no, I will not help you prank any other Slytherins."

They looked at one another before saying in unison. "Two galleons."

"A galleon and eight sickles. And for that price, you also leave Theo Nott alone as well. He doesn't deserve it."

They both stiffened. "His father was a Death Eater," said Mole Weasley.

"I know," Harry said calmly. "And believe me when I say that Fate played him a crueler trick by giving him that bastard for a father than you could come up with on your worst days."

Their eyes widened and then they nodded solemnly. They understood. "It's a deal." "No pranks or jokes on ickle firstie snake Potter." "Or ickle firstie snake Nott." They even shook on it. "Now then, tell us, how did you find out about the Map?"

He leaned in conspiratorially. "Let's just say ... 'snake' spelled sideways is 'sneak.' Until next time, gentlemen." And with that, he walked away whistling, not even knowing how much quiet admiration he'd earned from two future allies.

Neville was, as usual, on top of his game in Herbology, winning two points for Gryffindor. Nevertheless, Harry noticed he was tense and asked the boy about it, but he didn't want to talk. Instead, after waiting until most of the class had left, he asked Harry if he would mind skipping lunch to help him with the Levitation Charm which they would be covering in Charms. Hermione had been helping him to no avail, so he thought Harry might have some insights as he'd been the first Slytherin to master it the day before. Unfortunately, as they were leaving the greenhouse, an unwelcome voice intruded.

"That snake won't be able to help you, squib," said Jim from behind them. "Heck, he's not much more than a squib himself."

"Our points earned so far would seem to show who's the better wizard, little brother," Harry said mildly.

Jim's eyes flared. "Points aren't everything. And while your little study group has been playing around, I've been getting real lessons from the upper years on the Quidditch team." He whipped his wand, waved it and said "**ACCIO REMEMBERALL**." To Harry and Neville's surprise, the glass globe slipped out of Neville's pocket and floated lazily through the air and into Jim's hand.

"That was a Fifth Year summoning spell, by the way." Jim smirked and then looked down at the globe in his hand. "I still remember the day I first saw this thing, Longbottom. While your buddy Harry was standing around slack-jawed, afraid to stand up to a filthy Death Eater wannabee like Malfoy, I was up in the air, facing him head on, risking my life to get this back to you." He took a few steps towards

Neville and Harry, idly tossing the Rememberall in his hand as he did.

"I know I was kind of a jerk in the beginning, but I'm sorry. And I've gotten better, both at not acting out like I was and at working magic. Forget Harry and Granger and their stupid little club. Let me help you." He looked down smugly at the Rememberall. "After all, I've just proven that I'm better at magic than..."

"**ACCIO REMEMBERALL.**" Suddenly, it was Jim's turn to be surprised, as the orb shot out of his hands like a rocket and slapped into the waiting hand of Hermione, who had been standing off to the side out of sight.

Harry smiled, while Jim stared dumbfounded. "Nicely done," said the Slytherin. "When did you learn that spell?"

"Just now. Well, you told me the incantation on the train but didn't know the wand pattern, which Jim kindly just demonstrated. It's not really hard at all. Just a double reverse swish as you say 'Accio' and then a ten-degree-above-horizontal flick in the direction of the target object as you describe what it is. Mass and especially range will probably be quite limited until we're older and our magic is stronger, but the basic spell is simple enough for nearby objects you can clearly see."

Harry considered that and then lashed out with his own wand. "**ACCIO REMEMBERALL!**" The orb then shot out of Hermione's hand and into his own just as fast as it had for her. "Wow. That was easy." He looked up at Jim smugly. "Thanks, little brother. You're a really good teacher!"

Jim was speechless. It had taken him two days to master the charm that Hermione and his brother had just performed effortlessly after watching him demonstrate it once. Finally,

he shook off his surprise in favor of anger. "Go to hell, snake!" he said. "And you two traitors can go with him!" Then, he turned and stalked off.

Harry shook his head and handed the Rememberall to Neville, but he was surprised when the orb immediately turned a very dark and angry red that almost seemed to shimmer and pulse angrily in Neville's hand.

"Um, has it been doing that?"

"Yeah, for the last few days" said Neville quietly. "Makes sense. I forget more than I remember, it seems."

"Come on, Nev. Don't let Jim get you down," said Harry.

"He's not, Harry," Neville said curtly. "You two are."

Harry and Hermione looked at one another. "Um, excuse me?" Harry said.

He exhaled in frustration. "Jim just did a Fifth Year spell, which was impressive enough even if he had upperclassmen teach it to him. You two? You just learned it yourselves just from watching him do it once! And you do it better than him! Meanwhile, I can't do anything in the First Year spell book!" He started walking away from the other two. "I'm thinking maybe I should write to Uncle Algie and see if there's a way for me to voluntarily step down as heir and just pass the lordship directly to him. Jim was right. I am a squib in every way that matters."

"Neville!" exclaimed Hermione. "You can't give up!"

"Look! I'm grateful for all you've tried to do for me, both of you. But ... I just can't deal with this anymore. And I'm tired of feeling ... pitied! From now on, just leave me alone and

concentrate on the others in the group. They might actually get something out of it." And with that, he left. After a worried look passed between them, Harry and Hermione followed their friend towards the castle. Neither noticed Theo Nott standing at the corner of the greenhouse, a look of deep concern on his face.

Halloween 1991 (Part 2)

CHAPTER 12: Halloween 1991 (Pt. 2)

Neville didn't show up at lunch, but Hermione sat next to him during Charms, which the Gryffindors shared with the Hufflepuffs. His hour spent revising helped a little – he was able to perform most of the very basic charms that the class had learned in September, although clearly not at the same level of power or control that his classmates had. Problems started when Professor Flitwick introduced the new charm of the day – the Levitation Charm. The incantation was "Wingardium Leviosa," which Neville got after a single whispered correction from Hermione, and she assured him that his wand movements were correct. Despite all that, however, the feather sitting on his desk resolutely refused to move.

Unsurprisingly, Hermione was the first to achieve a proper result – her feather floated up gracefully and then danced around the ceiling in response to her wand movements. The small gaggle of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff girls (for whom Hermione had become a role model) all clapped, and Flitwick awarded Gryffindor three points. Across the room, Jim and Ron rolled their eyes. Then, Flitwick turned to Neville, who swallowed and then looked down at his feather as if it were a poisonous snake. He raised his wand cast the spell – perfectly, as far as Hermione could tell – and focused all of his will upon the feather. Nothing happened.

But Neville didn't release the spell. Instead, without taking his wand off the feather, he concentrated harder and poured more and more of his magical power into the spell he'd cast. He gritted his teeth painfully, and a bead of sweat appeared on his forehead. The feather shook slightly. His

face contorted into a mask of concentration and even pain, causing both Hermione and Flitwick to become alarmed. Neville paid them no mind. All of his attention was bent towards the feather, which had started to rock slightly as if striving to become airborne. When Hermione called out his name rather loudly, he ignored her. He also ignored the tickling sensation just below his nose and the strange coppery taste on his lips. Finally, as his vision began to blur, the feather slowly began to rise off the table – one inch, two inches, three – before it suddenly burst into flame, causing him to lose the spell. He sat back in his chair, exhausted and shaking. Instinctively, he rubbed his hand over his mouth and was startled to realize that his nose was bleeding. Then, he looked up and saw the whole class was staring at him, including a visibly shaken Flitwick.

"Are you quite alright, my boy?" he asked gently.

Neville swallowed deeply and wiped his nose again. "I'm ... I'm not feeling very well, Professor. May I be excused for a bit?"

Flitwick hesitated and then nodded. "Take as much time as you need. And if you don't feel better quite soon, I want you to go to the Infirmary. Understood?"

Neville nodded, snatched up his bookbag, and fairly fled the classroom. Just before he walked out, though, he turned back to look at his classmates. Jim Potter was looking right at him, smirking. And then, the Boy-Who-Lived mouthed a single word that Neville didn't need to hear to understand. "*Squib*." Neville walked out the door and did not return to class that day.

Hours later, Theo Nott stepped into a restroom to wash his hands before dinner and was surprised to find Neville

sitting on the floor in the corner staring vacantly at his wand. His face was clean from his earlier nosebleed but it was obvious he'd been crying. Theo looked around to make sure no one else was in the room before he tentatively spoke. "Are ... are you alright?"

Neville didn't even look up. "I'm fine. Just leave me alone."

Theo started to leave but then hesitated and turned back towards other boy. "I, uh, noticed your Rememberall this morning, after Herbology. It was ... red. Very red. And also pulsing."

"Yeah," Neville laughed bitterly. "Apparently, I'm very forgetful."

Theo bit his lip anxiously. Then, he moved a bit closer and knelt down to the floor so he could make eye contact.

"Longbottom ... Neville ... has anyone ... ever explained to you what a Rememberall is actually for?"

Neville just stared at him without comprehension. "*Oh dear,*" Theo thought to himself.

At dinner that evening, Harry was digging into some cottage pie when Malfoy nudged him slightly. "Your Mudblood friend is making a spectacle of herself trying to get your attention."

Harry glared at him. "I don't appreciate the use of that word, Malfoy."

Draco glared back. "I don't appreciate house mates who have greater loyalty to Gryffindors than Slytherins. And yet here we are."

"It's interesting that you're so concerned for my loyalty to the house when you've worked so hard to isolate me within it, Malfoy."

Before Malfoy could respond, a paper airplane landed on the table between the two of them, narrowly missing the gravy bowl. The words "*To Harry! From Hermione!*" were written on it. The two boys looked up from the airplane's direction to see Hermione waving at him.

"That's it," said Malfoy with a sneer. "Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy. We're moving. It's getting a bit too ... *muddy* around here." The four Slytherins relocated to the far end of the table. On the other side, all the other First Year Slytherins save Theo moved as far away from Harry as was possible. Harry frowned. He had hoped to lay low within Slytherin House for a while longer and continue learning the house's secrets before he made any sort of power play. Unfortunately, Malfoy seemed bent on forcing the issue, so a confrontation would likely happen quite soon. It was ... annoying.

Harry turned his attention to Hermione's airplane which he unfolded to reveal a blank page. To his surprise, words in Hermione's elegant script faded into view.

"Harry, do you know where Neville is? I'm very worried about him. Tap the parchment three times and whisper your response and then tap the parchment twice more to send it back to me."

Harry eyebrows shot up in surprise, and then he replied.

"I haven't seen him since Herbology. How are you doing this?"

"A modified Switching Spell linking your parchment to the one I'm writing on. It's out of the Third Year curriculum,

though I think this adaptation is from Fifth Year."

Harry chuckled. How these idiot Purebloods could even pretend to be superior while Muggleborn prodigies like Hermione stalked the school was a mystery to him.

"What *is* that?" asked Theo.

"Oh, just Hermione, once again proving that everything Draco thinks about blood purity is bollocks. By the way, have you by any chance seen Neville recently?"

Theo coughed nervously. "I saw him about an hour ago. He was in the first floor boys' bathroom. He was very upset."

"Yeah. I heard something happened in Charms and he had to leave class, but I haven't gotten any details."

Theo chewed his lip again. "It was more than that. Harry, do *you* know what a Rememberall is for? Because Longbottom didn't until I told him earlier. I ... I realized he didn't and thought he ought to know. I hope I didn't make a mistake by telling him."

Harry was confused but also suddenly concerned. "Neville told me that a Rememberall lets you know when you've forgotten something important."

"Yes, but it's more than that." Theo looked around conspiratorially. "In the mid-1700's, a spell came into widespread usage called the Memory Charm, followed soon after by its close relative, the False Memory Charm. The former creates a targeted amnesia in someone. The later replaces the erased memories with new ones of the spellcaster's choice. They caused a lot of problems at first, until the Ministry passed laws heavily regulating them. In fact, they were nearly declared Unforgivables, but they

were deemed too valuable for use on Muggles in preserving the Statute of Secrecy to ban so completely. They aren't taught at Hogwarts and you're supposed to get licensed by the Ministry to learn and use them, but there are plenty of old families which have preserved them in grimoires so they're still available to learn illegally if you have the right contacts."

"And the Rememberall protects against them?"

"Not exactly – it just lets you know when you've been hit by one. It's kind of a tradition in wealthy old Pureblood families, especially the paranoid ones, to gift them to children starting at Hogwarts. Only the rich ones, though, because they're pretty expensive. It's to hopefully prevent children from being mentally manipulated until they're old enough to develop psychic defenses. They turn a pale red if you've forgotten something naturally, a dark red if you've had memories erased or altered through magic," Theo swallowed, "and a very dark red if you've had lots of memories affected that way."

Harry paled. "Like Neville's did earlier today. Can these memory alterations be reversed?"

"That's another thing Rememberalls do. If you carry one with you at all times, it can gradually reconstruct memories that have been erased or altered by magic. It may take a long time depending on how extensive the alterations are and how powerful the wizard was that cast the spell. That's what the glow meant this afternoon. Longbottom's Rememberall has finally reconstructed his true memories and is ready to restore them."

Harry inhaled sharply. "Did you tell Neville how to do that?"

Theo grimaced. "Yes. For what it's worth, I did tell him that he should probably have someone with him when he restored his memories in case they were traumatic, but he insisted on doing it alone. I guess I should have come and told you anyway, but it seemed kind of ... personal to him."

"Maybe so, but you still should have come and told me."

"Well, I'm sorry," said Theo hotly. "I'm not used to all this ... kindness stuff. I wasn't raised for it."

Harry smiled. "I don't know, Theo. I think you might just have a knack for it." Then, he turned back to the parchment, tapped it, and whispered another message.

"Neville is in the first floor boy's toilets. He's very upset. I'll explain why on the way. We'll go as soon as the Feast is over." But just as Harry sent the message, the doors to the Great Hall flew open, and Professor Quirrel entered in a panic.

"TROOOOLLLL! IN THE DUNGEON! ... Thought you ought to know." And then the silly man fainted.

Harry exhaled loudly. "Bugger."

There was a brief moment of school-wide panic which the Headmaster shut down before commanding the students to return to their dorms. Harry tapped the parchment again.

"Strike that. We go now. Slip away from the other Gryffs and meet me outside the Great Hall doorway."

Hermione nodded at him from across the room and then rose to leave with her house. Harry also rose, but then Rodney Montague, the Seventh Year Slytherin prefect, called out to his house. "Slytherins, sit back down. Our

illustrious Headmaster in his ... haste has apparently forgotten that our dorms, like the Hufflepuffs, are in the dungeons. Ergo, we shall remain here in the Great Hall and once the Lions and Eagles have left, the prefects will seal the doors and ward them. No one, whether human or troll, will get in or out until the crisis is over. Understood?"

The Slytherins all sat down. "Double Bugger," spat Harry ruefully. He closed his eyes and started muttering to himself as he rubbed his temples. "Need a distraction. Need a distraction. Think!"

Theo leaned in and put a hand to his shoulder. "Seriously?!" he whispered urgently. "Are you seriously considering sneaking out of here, defying the prefects, and running off to find Longbottom when there's a troll on the loose?!"

Harry opened his eyes and looked at Theo. "Neville is my friend, and he's in trouble. So I'm there for him. Just like you're my friend, and if you're ever in trouble, I'm there for you." Harry had said it matter-of-factly and without thinking, so he was surprised when Theo jerked back, his eyes widening in surprise. Then, with a twinge of sadness, Harry realized the other boy had probably never had anyone offer him that degree of friendship before. Theo looked around and then put his hands under the table so no one could see as he removed the silver ring he always wore. He handed it stealthily to Harry.

"Put it on the third finger of your left hand. Then, when you're ready, take a *deep* breath and give it a half-twist. And then, *move*! It will only last while you hold your breath, and then it will have to recharge for a while. And when you next take a breath, everyone here will immediately notice you're gone. Now *go*!"

Surprised, Harry put the ring on his finger, took the deepest breath he could, and twisted the ring. Nothing happened. He looked around and no one was paying him any mind. Slowly, he stood. No one turned in his direction. Carefully he stepped over the bench and moved towards the door. When it was clear that everyone was ignoring him completely, he ran, slipping through the gap just as the Slytherin and Hufflepuff prefects were closing the doors. As he ducked out, he noticed that Professor Quirrel was no longer laying on the floor where he'd fainted. Harry continued to hold his breath until he caught up with Hermione, who was hiding behind a suit of armor watching the receding troupe of Gryffindors as they headed towards their tower. Then, when his lungs were burning and he could hold it no longer, he let go with a gasp, and the girl jumped with a small "eek!"

"Harry! How did you do that?! Surely invisibility spells are too powerful to cast at our age!"

"Let's just say," said Harry between gasps of air, "that it was through the power of friendship and leave it there for now. Come on, we have to get to Neville."

On the way the restroom, Harry filled Hermione in on what Theo had said about Neville's Rememberall.

"So someone has been tampering with Neville's memories on a repeated basis? I wonder if that's why his memory is so poor generally."

"Probably," Harry said grimly. Suddenly, the two were stopped by a noxious stench that almost made them both gag. From around the corner, they could hear a growl, the sound of smashing stonework ... and Neville Longbottom yelling of absolute terror. Harry muttered bitterly under his

breath. "*Troll in the **dungeon**. Thought you ought to know.*"

Halloween 1991 (Part 3)

CHAPTER 13: Halloween 1991 (Pt. 3)

*Suddenly, the two were stopped by a noxious stench that almost made them both gag. From around the corner, they could hear a growl, the sound of smashing stonework, and Neville yelling of terror. Harry muttered bitterly under his breath. "'Troll in the **dungeon**. Thought you ought to know."*

A few seconds earlier...

Neville washed his face for several minutes, splashing his eyes with the cool water to wipe away the redness where he'd been crying. Then, he stared at himself in the mirror for a long time, as if wondering whether the reflection in the mirror was one he still recognized. Emotionally drained, he headed for the door and opened it, only to find himself staring into the face (well, actually the stomach) of a twelve-foot-tall troll armed with a club. The monster snarled at him.

"Yeah, I guess it's just been that sort of day," Neville thought with a strange mixture of amazement, annoyance and resignation. Then, he dropped down to the floor with a yell of fright, ducking just as the troll reached a meaty hand out for him. The boy scrambled away until his back was against the far wall as he desperately tried to remember any spells he could actually perform that might work against a troll, while the great beast squeezed into the room, ripping out part of the door frame with its huge body as it entered. Neville tried Hermione's fireworks spell, but nothing came out of his wand except a soft pop and two lonely sparks. The troll reached down towards him hungrily

... and then suddenly roared as a blast of fireworks struck its posterior. Angrily, it turned to face its new quarry, Harry and Hermione.

"***WINDGARDIUM LEVIOSA!***" yelled Harry, and the troll's club flew up over its head and swept around to smash its face. Unfortunately, the troll was surprisingly fast when it needed to be. It threw up an arm and batted the club away and towards Harry and Hermione, who had to duck quickly to avoid it and then were knocked down by falling masonry when it shattered against the wall. Hermione recovered first and started back in with her fireworks. Harry shook off the impact and quickly joined her with fireworks of his own.

Across the room, Neville was shocked at the sight of his two friends who he had so rudely spurned earlier but who were now risking their very lives to save him. Still trying to think of a spell, he looked down at his wand, and he suddenly felt *hatred* for the useless stick in his hand, the wand that had never chosen him and that he'd never chosen as his own. Then, he looked up at the back of the troll that threatened his friends, and something burned in young Neville Longbottom's eyes that no one would have ever expected to see there. *Rage*.

Harry and Hermione were still trying to harm the troll or at least frighten it away with fireworks, but the beast was barely slowed down by them. Harry vaguely recalled that trolls had magic resistant skin and didn't think there were any spells remotely possible for a First Year that could harm it. Then, to his amazement, he saw Neville climb up onto a sink and then leap onto the creature's back! With one hand, he grabbed hold of the iron collar around the troll's neck and hoisted himself up over its shoulder. His other hand still held his wand, which, with loud grunt, he jammed up the troll's left nostril. Then, still barely hanging on to the

struggling troll with one hand, Neville shifted his grip, and with a scream like a furious berserker in the midst of battle, he shoved the wand another three inches up the monster's nose with an audible "*squick*."

With that, the troll screamed in agony, and a thin trail of green blood trickled out of the nostril where the wand had been lodged. The troll's thrashings increased, and Neville finally lost his hold, falling hard onto the floor behind the monster. Quickly, Harry flicked his own wand towards the protruding butt of Neville's wand. "**WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!**" He pushed with all his magical might and the wand slid another few inches up towards the troll's brain. There was resistance, though – Harry could almost feel the tip of the wand snap and crack against the troll's brain pan. The creature started pounding on the sides of its head in pain.

"HERMIONE! TOGETHER!" he yelled. The young witch raised her wand, and the two cried out in unison.

"**WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!**" With the sharp sound of cracking bone, Neville's wand shot up the troll's nostril and penetrated its brain. There was a spray of green ichor from the beast's nose. The bellowing stopped instantly, and the monster's eyes rolled back up into its head. Then, the half-ton creature wobbled before falling backwards, straight towards where Neville had landed. In a flash, Harry repositioned himself and cast. "**ACCIO NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM!**" The other boy slid right through the wobbling troll's legs and into Harry and Hermione's waiting arms. The troll collapsed and crashed to the floor with an enormous thud.

Neville then pulled both Hermione and Harry into a bone-crushing hug. "I'm sorry I was such a prat to you two," sobbed Neville. "You two are the best friends a guy could

ever have." At that, Harry's eyes got a bit misty as well. He'd never really had friends himself before Hogwarts thanks to the Dursleys, and now, between Hermione, Neville and Theo, he had more and better friends than he'd ever imagined possible.

The bonding session was cut short, however, by a loud shriek in a Scottish brogue. "WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?!" Behind McGonagall were Snape, Flitwick and a nervous looking Quirrell.

"Well, um," said Harry nervously, "there was this troll. And ... I think we killed it."

Hermione gasped. "Oh, we did, didn't we! I mean, I know we didn't have a choice, but it was still a semi-sentient being!"

Snape, who had walked past them to examine the fallen beast, snorted loudly to register his contempt for Hermione's soft-hearted nature. "Then rejoice, Miss Granger, for your poor innocent victim is not dead. A troll's regenerative powers are second to none. Your ... innovative use of what appears to be Mr. Longbottom's wand as an excerebration tool has placed the troll into a coma. When the obstruction is removed, the damage will heal itself and the troll will return to life no worse for wear." Snape turned towards Quirrel who shrank back from his gaze. "With that in mind, perhaps Professor Quirrel might see to the troll's proper containment. As I recall, you have presented yourself as something of an expert on trolls, have you not?"

"Oh, y-y-y-y-yes, P-p-p-p-professor S-s-s-snape. R-r-r-right away!"

"But what I wish to know, Miss Granger, Mr. Longbottom, is *what on Earth possessed you to go after a troll in the first*

place!" McGonagall practically shrieked.

"Well," interjected Harry calmly, while wiping dust and debris off his robes, "to be honest, we weren't actually going after the troll at all. The announcement at dinner was that the troll was in the dungeon, not on the First Floor. However, Neville ... took ill during Charms and was in here when the announcement was made. We just wanted to make sure he was safe."

"It is true, Minerva, that young Longbottom took ill during my class today," said Professor Flitwick. "I allowed him to leave early and did not see him at dinner. I was actually considering sending a prefect to check on him when Quirinus made his announcement. In my distraction, I quite forgot about you, Mr. Longbottom, for which I offer my most sincere apologies."

"That explains Miss Granger's presence, Potter, but the Slytherins were instructed to remain in the Great Hall. What are *you* doing here?" asked Snape harshly.

"Neville is my friend, sir," said Harry simply. He did his best to ignore the look of contempt that provoked in his Head of House.

"Ahem," interrupted McGonagall. "That's all well and good, but, if I may ask, how did three First Years manage to defeat the troll?!"

"Oh, well, trolls have magic resistant skin, so none of our spells could hurt it. But then, Neville had this absolutely brilliant idea of jamming his wand up the troll's nose, and once he'd inserted the excera-what-Professor-Snape-said tool, we drove it the rest of the way into its brain with the Levitation Charm we learned from Professor Flitwick."

"Oh, good show!" said the Charms professor in an excited voice. "An awareness of the defensive properties of a dangerous creature. A resourceful use of an improvised weapon. And a creative use of a charm you just learned this week. Plus *inter-house cooperation*! Well done! I think an award of, say, fifteen points a piece seems appropriate. Don't you agree, Severus? Minerva?"

Neither of the two objected (though Harry thought Snape had considered it), and McGonagall said it was time for the three children to return to their dorms. She would conduct Neville and Hermione to Gryffindor tower, while Snape escorted Harry to the Slytherin dungeon. But at that point, Neville stepped forward.

"Excuse me, Professor McGonagall. Before we do that, I need to go to the Headmaster's Office, or really any office with a Floo connection. I need to speak to my Gran. Immediately."

"Mr. Longbottom," replied McGonagall. "It's very late. I know this has been traumatic for you but I think it would be best if you got some rest and then contacted your grandmother by owl in the morning."

"I'm sorry, Professor," said Neville a bit more forcefully, "but I *really* need to speak with my Gran as soon as possible. Also, I would appreciate it if someone with the authority to do so contacted the DMLE and arranged for a couple of aurors to come to the school so I could make some kind of statement to them."

A silence descended over the room. "Mr. Longbottom," said McGonagall, now with a bit of asperity in her voice. "At this point, there is no evidence that the troll's appearance is anything but an unfortunate lapse in the castle's wards. The

incident will be investigated by the Hogwarts staff and if it is determined that the troll was brought into the school intentionally..."

"Professor McGonagall," interrupted Neville, who was now visibly annoyed with his Head of House. "With all due respect - *Sod. The Flipping. Troll!* I want to speak to my Gran and I want to speak to someone from the DMLE." As he spoke, Neville reached into a pocket and pulled out his Rememberall, which was now perfectly clear of any redness. "Because I have just learned that my great-uncle, Algernon Longbottom, Regent for House Longbottom, has tried to *murder* me." He glanced at Harry and Hermione significantly before looking back to his Head of House. "*Five* times."

Harry's eyes widened, while Hermione put her hand over her mouth. "Bloody hell," she whispered.

Despite his exhaustion, the corners of Neville's mouth rose into a faint smile. "Language, Hermione."

Halloween 1991 (Finale)

CHAPTER 14: Halloween 1991 (Finale: The Power Play)

Immediately after Neville's dramatic announcement, he was escorted to the Headmaster's Office, while McGonagall accompanied Hermione to Gryffindor tower and Snape grudgingly led Harry back to the Slytherin dungeon. The Potions Master seemed quite annoyed with the young Snake and also seemed to be experiencing some pain in his leg.

"Of all the unmitigated Gryffindorish tomfoolery! And you were awarded fifteen points for it! You are fortunate that I don't deduct thirty for your actions!"

"Sir, as I explained, we had no idea that the troll would be on the First Floor and merely intended to find Mr. Longbottom and see that he got to safety. I had to make a split second decision with no time to plan or investigate, and I made the best decision I could under the circumstances."

"Exactly! And you made exactly the sort of rash decision I'd expect from a Gryffindor rather than a Slytherin!"

"Well, sir, respectfully, if that's what you think, then you should probably change how Sorting is done here at Hogwarts. Because all the Hat said to me was that Slytherin was the house of cunning and ambition where I'd have the best chance to prove myself. I might have asked to go somewhere else if it had warned me that Slytherin was also the house of selfish prats who abandon their friends when things get tough."

Snape's head snapped around furiously. "And what is THAT supposed to mean, POTTER!?"

Harry looked up at Snape, somewhat surprised at his anger. "Merely that, as I said, Neville Longbottom is a close friend, and I don't accept that it is a Slytherin characteristic to abandon valued friends to their fate without trying your best to help them," he said honestly.

Snape relaxed, mollified. For an instant, he had thought that the boy was referring to how his friendship with Lily came to an end all those years before. "Still, five points deducted for defying your prefect's orders," he snapped irritably.

Harry sighed. "Yes sir." They walked on in silence for a few seconds. "Mind you, even if I *were* a selfish prat, I still would have gone after Neville. I've put a lot of effort on forming a relationship with the Heir Presumptive of an Ancient and Noble House. It would have been foolish to ignore the opportunity to ingratiate myself with him further when I genuinely believed the risk was minimal."

Snape glanced back down at the boy as they walked. "Well, that's *better*, I suppose." Then, he winced in pain again.

"Sir, the infirmary isn't far if you want to stop in there for a bit. If I may say so, that does look like a very painful Cerberus bite."

Snape stopped and looked down at the boy in a mix of amazement and fury. "Oh no. No, no, **NO!** *Tell me* that you are not so much a Gryffindor that you ..."

"Of course not!" Harry interrupted indignantly. "What kind of idiot do you take me for?" Then, he changed to an almost cheerful expression. "Speaking of idiots, though, I am

reliably informed that the Git-Who-Lived and his pet Weasel *have* been to see the Cerberus, and also that they have noticed the trap door it's guarding. I gather they see it as some sort of ... adventure."

Snape all but groaned at the news, as the two resumed their walk towards the dungeons. "Please keep me informed of anything you hear about the matter and do not approach that room yourself."

"Yes sir. Should I also keep an eye on Professor Quirrell?"

Snape's head snapped around again in surprise. Then, he became annoyed at himself for his lack of discretion. Unfortunately, his normally rigid self-control was rather impaired by the intense pain in his leg inflicted by Hagrid's infernal beast. "Why would you think Quirrell is worthy of your suspicion? He is a Hogwarts professor, after all."

"Well, you yourself just said he claims to be an expert on trolls. But when he actually encounters a troll, he doesn't try to capture or kill it. Instead, he runs to the Great Hall, announces that the troll is in the dungeons, and faints dead away. It turns out, however, that the troll is *not* in the dungeons but on the First Floor, and some distance away from any staircases big enough for it to fit through easily. And as I'm sneaking out of the Great Hall, I notice that Quirrell is already recovered from his supposed faint and has disappeared completely. So it occurs to me that *maybe* Quirrell deliberately let the troll into the castle onto the First Floor and merely *said* it was in the dungeon so that all the professors will run off and start searching the castle floor by floor from the dungeon up, thereby giving him time to go straight to the third floor and try to get past the Cerberus. Luckily, the Head of Slytherin House is clever enough to see that the troll is merely a diversion and goes

to the Third Floor corridor himself to secure it which, unfortunately, is when the Cerberus got a piece of him."

Snape looked down at the boy appraisingly. "Hmm. Have you considered the possibility that the cunning Head of Slytherin is actually the one trying to steal ... that which lies beyond the Cerberus ... and merely used the troll as a distraction?"

Harry shook his head. "That theory would not explain how the troll got in, unless the cunning Head of Slytherin let it in and then just blindly trusted that Professor Quirrell would find it and then act appropriately. And it still doesn't explain Professor Quirrell's own suspicious actions. And if the troll getting in was just a coincidence which the cunning Head of Slytherin took advantage of, well, that's just wildly out of character, I think, to rush off like that without any sort of advanced planning. Practically ... Gryffindorish."

The corner of Snape's mouth twitched. "Perhaps the cunning Head of Slytherin and Quirrell are in it together," he suggested idly.

"I refuse to believe that the cunning Head of Slytherin would ever work with a man who wears *a turban*," said Harry drily.

"How is it possible that you are the child of James Potter?!"

"As I recall, nurture over nature was the theory you proposed. Oh, and by the way, this may be completely unrelated, but whenever we're anywhere near Quirrell, both Jim and I get strange headaches. I just thought it was generic weirdness before, but after this troll business, it seems like it might be important."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Potter, cease your pretensions of childish naivete. While I deplore your Gryffindor tendencies, it is clear that you are remarkably cunning for a First Year student. You know perfectly well that if you have a mysterious ailment that only strikes you whenever you are near someone whom you have already found suspicious, *of course it is important!* Do these headaches last the entire time you are near him?"

"No, it's more like an intermittent stabbing pain centered right here," Harry touched his scar. "Hermione says that from his reaction, Jim gets the same pain also centered on his own scar."

"Hmm. Avoid Quirrell outside of class. During your Defense lessons, whenever these pains strike you, make a note of the time and whether Quirrell was doing anything unusual at the onset. If you can do so discretely, have your Gryffindor associates observe the Other Potter to see how he reacts and whether his reactions differ from your own. You will present a written summary of your notes to me in one week's time. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," said Harry as if instructions to essentially spy on another teacher and also get his friends to do likewise were the most commonplace things in the world.

By that point, the two had arrived at the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room. "As I have said, Potter, you have a distressingly strong Gryffindor streak within you, which is unfortunate but understandable given your lineage. That said, I must confess that I am thus far pleased to see how well you have harnessed it and bent it to a Slytherin's wisdom. Five points *to* Slytherin." Those were the first points Snape had given Harry since the start of school, and

the boy smiled appreciatively and thanked his teacher with suitable humility.

With that, Snape gave the password and the door to the common room slide open. Inside were the majority of Harry's house mates who had only just arrived after the all-clear was given. Rodney Montague was the first to meet Snape and Harry at the door.

"Mr. Montague," drawled Snape. "I return the last of your charges to you. His punishment for leaving the Great Hall after you had ordered it sealed has already been addressed. No further comment on that matter is necessary."

Montague looked back and forth between Snape and Harry. "Very good, sir," he finally said.

"And for what it's worth, Mr. Montague," said Harry, "I sincerely apologize if my rash actions caused you any distress."

The boy looked up at the prefect with such a mixture of respect and perfect innocence that, for a second, Montague almost thought he was sincere. Snape exited the common room, and Montague, after looking strangely at Harry for a few seconds, rounded up the other prefects to let them know what Snape had said. Harry walked over where an anxious Theo was waiting off by himself. He warmly thanked the boy for his help and shook his hand, discretely palming the ring back to him in the process. Theo nodded bashfully. Then, Harry headed off in the direction of the First Year dorm rooms when his way was blocked by Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. The rest of the First Years (and a dozen or so from the other years) were near enough to observe but were not actively interfering.

"Unbelievable!" exclaimed Malfoy. "When my father hears that the Heir of an Ancient and Noble House snuck away, in defiance of the prefect's orders, in pursuit of a blood traitor squib and a mudblood ..."

"**BINGO!**" shouted Harry loudly. All the Slytherins nearby were startled by his outburst. "Sorry. That's a Muggle thing. You finally managed to work *mudblood, blood traitor*, and *my father* into a single sentence. I thought if I pointed it out first I might win a prize." Somewhere in the background, he heard Theo snigger briefly before getting control of himself.

"You are such an embarrassment to this house, Potter. How many points did you lose us with that stunt?"

"Well actually, I *gained* fifteen. But then, Professor Snape took five from me not obeying the prefect's orders. *But then*, after I explained my reasoning for my actions, he gave me back five for demonstrating what he referred to as *Slytherin wisdom*."

"You're lying," snarled Malfoy.

"Ask him tomorrow," replied Harry cheerfully. "*I. Dare. You.*"

"When my father..."

"WHY ARE YOU HERE?!" interrupted Harry with an angry shout. Draco was taken aback and several other Slytherins moved closer to the arguing group.

"Because someone needs to put you in your ..."

"No! Not '*why are you here, right now, annoying me?*'! I mean '*why are you in Slytherin House at all?*'! Yes, you're a

rich Pureblood. So what. So is Zacharias Smith and he's a Hufflepuff! We've been in this house for two months, and I haven't seen you display anything I'd call cunning! You're certainly not subtle! And I don't think you have any ambition beyond strutting around like a peacock flaunting the wealth and privilege you've gotten from an inheritance that you've done *nothing* to earn. And you *talk* like one of those Muggle dolls that spouts prerecorded messages if you pull a string out of its back. It's all '*Mudblood-This*' and '*Blood Traitor-That*' and '*Wait till my father hears*.' It's pathetic!"

"Why you filthy little Halfblood...!" Draco furiously started fumbling for his wand.

Harry's eyes lit up almost deliriously. "*Finally!*" he thought. He'd gotten his wand and his holster on July 31st, and spent thirty minutes every night for the next month practicing how to quick draw it because he'd foolishly thought that such things were a factor in wand usage. When he got to Hogwarts, however, he discovered that, outside of aurors and professional duelists, wizards didn't seem to care about such things. In fact, he was the only First Year who'd actually paid for one of Ollivander's overpriced wand holsters instead of just tucking his wand away in the pocket of his robes like everyone else. He still kept practicing with the holster for several minutes each day though ... *for this exact moment*.

Harry flicked his wrist down, and his wand shot out of his holster with a soft "*snikt*" and landed in the palm of his hand. Instantly, he snapped it back up directly into Malfoy's face, nearly touching the tip of his nose. The entire maneuver had taken half a second, not even one of Harry's better times, but it was lightning fast compared to his opponent who was still fumbling for his wand. Malfoy froze

in surprise, while Crabbe and Goyle backed away nervously. There were gasps all around at Harry's effortless speed. Few of the young Slytherins watching had ever been exposed to real dueling, and from their limited experience, Harry's reflexes appeared superhumanly fast.

"You know," said Harry easily. "My friend, the Mudblood Granger, taught me this neat fireworks spell. I bet at this range it would *really* hurt."

At that, Rodney Montague finally stepped forward. "Potter, that's enough. Stand down."

"It's okay, Mr. Montague. We're fine. We're all fine here. Aren't we fine, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco looked up from the tip of the wand to peer into Harry's eyes. And like James Potter before him, he suddenly realized that Harry's eyes were the *exact same color* as the Killing Curse. "Yes, Montague," he said with a dry swallow. "We're ... we're all fine here."

"Yes, perfectly fine. By the way, I mentioned that I won fifteen house points but forgot to say what for. You see, the Mudblood Granger and the Blood Traitor Squib Longbottom and little old Blood Traitor Halfblood me, well, we found that mountain troll that caused Professor Quirrell to faint like a little girl. And then ... we beat it into a coma."

There were even more gasps at that, and Zabini exclaimed "No way!" in a surprisingly Muggle manner. Harry made a mental note to look into that.

"Yes way!" he replied with a grin. "I, with the help of two other First Years that most of you look down on as dirt beneath your feet, took down a fully grown troll by ourselves. So, Mr. Malfoy, I invite you to consider whether

or not I should be intimidated by your weak magic and your father's money and your two henchmen. Because the correct answer is... I'm not."

Then, he took two steps back and raised his wand. With a subtle flick of his wrist, the wand snapped back into its holster with an audible "zip" that made half the Slytherins in the room flinch. "Now then, I'm tired, I've had a long day, and I think I have troll blood in my hair. So, I'm going to take a hot shower and then go to bed. If you want to continue this discussion at some point in the future, Malfoy, I'd be happy to oblige. But before then, I think you should sit down with a piece of parchment, write down all your assets, and then write down what you think my assets are. And then, double the points you put down in my column, because I promise you haven't seen half of what I can do. And *then*, Malfoy? If you still want to take me on, go for it. We'll see who rusts first."

Finally, he broke eye contact with the visibly shaken Draco to look around the room. Some were intimidated while others merely looked thoughtful. But *everyone* had been transfixed by Harry's performance. He smiled. "Good night, Slytherins," he said mildly as he walked around Goyle towards the dorms. As he left, he was alternately whistling and humming a strange tune that the Slytherin students found at once both unnerving and unearthly. Had there been any Muggleborns in the house, they would have instantly recognized it as the theme from "The Good, The Bad and The Ugly."

Over in the corner, out of everyone's view, Theo Nott watched as his first friend strolled away. And for possibly the first time in his life, Theo grinned from ear to ear.

Meet the Longbottoms (pt 1)

Chapter Notes

AN: Possible Trigger Warning. This chapter and the next are fairly dark compared to what's come before, with some scenes involving violence directed at a small child. No one is actually injured, but it may be disturbing for some readers.

CHAPTER 15: Meet the Longbottoms (pt 1)

When Neville Longbottom was two years old ...

Algie Longbottom was annoyed.

When his children had been young, it had fallen to his late wife, Wendy, to tend to them while he worked long hours building his meager inheritance into a small fortune. Well, to be fair, "meager" and "small" were relative terms. Algie was rather prosperous compared to most wizards, and his inheritance had given him a substantial leg-up in the world. Still, his holdings were nothing compared to the Longbottom estate that went to his older brother, the late Lord Archimedes Francisco "Archie" Longbottom. But that wasn't what annoyed Algie.

Archie married Augusta Crouch ("Gussie" within the family) in 1953. Their son, Frank, was born in December of '57 and displayed his first bit of accidental magic at eighteen months. And that was that as far as Algie was concerned. Archie and Gussie had their Heir Presumptive, so barring mishap, Algie was on his own. With children of his own to feed, he put his nose to the grindstone to build up

something for himself and his family, all the while knowing that Little Frank's life was assured. But that wasn't what annoyed Algie.

In 1972, there was a particularly nasty Dragon Pox outbreak that claimed Wendy and Archie both. Due to Frank's age at the time, there was a three month period in which Algie had been called to serve as Regent Longbottom until the boy turned fifteen and could provisionally claim his Lordship. Upon doing so, Lord Francisco Claudius Longbottom shook his uncle's hand warmly and gave him a small brass plaque. "To Algernon Longbottom. In appreciation for services rendered," it read. From that day to the present, the two would talk no more than a dozen times, the last of which was when Frank politely but firmly denied a request to sponsor Algie's son into the Ministry because "his grades just aren't high enough." But that wasn't what annoyed Algie.

In 1981, Death Eaters attacked Longbottom Manor and placed both its Lord and its Lady under the Cruciatus Curse for so long that both of them were driven mad and had to be committed to St. Mungo's. Augusta was named as the custodial guardian to their infant son, Neville, but Wizengamot law decreed that Algie would be the Longbottom Regent. It seemed that arrogant fool Frank hadn't bothered to make a will, and so the Wizengamot had exercised its discretion to appoint Algie as regent because if the boy was a squib or for some reason didn't make it to his fifteenth birthday, Algie was next in line of succession and so should be acquainted with the House's affairs. The most likely scenario, however, was that Algie was now committed to fifteen years of thankless drudgery managing someone else's estates while his own languished. He stoically accepted the regency and then turned control of most of his own businesses over to his son, Reginald, who he hoped

was up to the challenge. But that wasn't what annoyed Algie.

What annoyed Algie was that the Brat wouldn't stop *crying*! He'd grudgingly agreed to take the boy for today because Gussie wanted to visit Frank and Alice in St. Mungo's and felt Neville was too young to go. Unfortunately, Neville was asleep when she dropped him off and so she did not realize that she had left "Ebby" behind. Algie didn't know who or what "Ebby" was and didn't much care, but it was apparently so essential to the Brat's happiness that he'd started crying immediately upon waking up in his playpen and seeing that "Ebby" wasn't there to greet him. And he had been crying for ever an hour now, despite the best efforts of Algie's house elves to entertain him, wailing over and over "Want Ebby!" while Algie tried to ignore the noise and get back to balancing the books for one of the farms he was now managing on the Brat's account.

Then, suddenly, there was a soft pop, and Neville's wailing abruptly ceased. Curious, Algie went down the hall to the living room where Neville and his playpen had been deposited. The boy was still there, giggling softly while clutching a soft black teddy bear with baby blue glass eyes. Neville looked up at Algie and smiled. "Ebby!" he exclaimed.

Algie looked at the bear and then to Neville and then back again. "Naturally," he said quietly. "Lubby, did you or any of the other elves summon that bear?"

"No, Master Algie! Little Master Neville wish really hard for his Ebby and it just come to him!"

"Naturally," said Algie again. "Return to your other duties, all of you. You're not needed here." The three house elves nodded and popped away. Algie stared at the stuffed

animal. He remembered it well, of course. Its name wasn't "Ebby." That was just the child's way of saying "Elby," or more accurately "L.B." for Longbottom. Archie Longbottom had owned L.B. when he'd been a child as had his father and grandfather before him. When Archie had turned seven, he decided he was too old for a stuffed bear and gave it to Algie as a birthday present. And when Algie had gotten a little older, he too had put it aside. But even as a child, he hoped he someday he might gift it to children of his own, just as it had been gifted to him.

That hope ended the day Archie had popped in "for a visit" and idly asked if he could get L.B. back as a present for Frank. Algie explained that he'd already given it to his own newborn son, Reginald. Archie replied that, as a newborn, Reginald would hardly miss it. Algie pointedly reminded Archie that he himself had given it to Algie as a *birthday gift*. Archie answered that it had been a gift he'd made at the age of seven before he'd realized it was something to pass from father to son. Algie answered rather coldly that he hadn't realized that a particular children's toy was somehow magically entailed as part of the Lordship's bounty. Things quickly escalated to shouting on both sides before Algie finally stormed up to his son's nursery, snatched up L.B. and practically threw it at his brother, telling him to get out and he hoped his little monster choked on one of L.B.'s glass eyes. Shocked, Archie left quickly, and the two brothers didn't speak again until the following Christmas, when Archie sent a veritable flock of stuffed animals for both Reginald and his newborn sister Enid (but not L.B., of course) and a letter of apology to Algie.

For the sake of his children, who he thought might someday need the support of the Lord of House Longbottom, Algie accepted the apology, and his relations with Archie mostly

mended. But he never forgot the incident and what it meant. That he would always be the second brother, entitled to nothing from the Longbottom name save a lump sum financial payment left to him purely out of a vague sense of parental obligation. No estates. No trust vaults. No heirlooms. Not even a stuffed teddy bear to pass on to his son.

And now, the final insult – Neville was indisputably a wizard. And Algie was the witness for it. Because he'd just seen the Brat summon L.B. through accidental magic, presumably all the way from Longbottom Manor in Lancashire. Neville was a wizard, and so Neville was the Heir Presumptive, and thus Algie's lot in life now was to manage Neville's estates and assets until the Brat was old enough to claim them for himself, at which point he would probably give Algie a brass plaque to match the other one Frank had given him years before.

Algie stared for a long time at the adorable infant and his stuffed bear. And then, something inside him snapped like a twig in a heavy ice storm. "No. No, you little brat, it won't be that easy for you. And I certainly won't let you beat me with the help of *that* thing. **EVANESCO!**" There was a flash as the teddy bear vanished out of Neville's arms, startling the child. But before he could start crying again, Algie's wand flashed a second time. "**OBLIViate!** You will forget about Ebby. You will forget that you ever had a bear that looked anything like Ebby." He paused as a vicious gleam came into his eyes. "But you *will* remember that there was once something you loved that you have now lost forever. And you will remember that the *reason* you lost it because *you wished for it too hard!*"

Little Neville shook his head for a few seconds and then crawled over to play with some blocks, with a strange look

on his face, as if he were sad but didn't know why. Later, when Augusta returned, Algie told her that Neville had been a perfect angel and that she shouldn't hesitate to ask him to babysit whenever she needed a break. He also reminded her to be on the lookout for signs of accidental magic because Neville was getting to that age.

The next day, Algie went to Flourish & Botts and purchased several books on squibs and the latest theories about what caused them.

When Neville was three years old ...

Algie had been visiting Longbottom Manor for a week, as was his right as Longbottom Regent. On the fourth day there, he was in a sitting room reading the *Daily Prophet* when he felt a small hand tug on his pants leg. It was the Brat.

"Well, hello there, little Neville!" Algie said with false kindness. "What can I do for you?"

"Will you read Baba Rab to me, Unca Algie?"

"Babbity Rabbit, you mean? Well where is it, Neville?"

"Baba Rab on da shelf in lie-berry," the child replied.

"Why don't you show me?" Algie asked.

And with that, the toddler led his great-uncle to the nearby library, where Neville pointed to a book on a middle shelf. Algie noted that the bookshelf was freestanding instead of mounted to the wall, and his eyes gleamed.

"Oh, that's not too high, Neville. You can reach it. Show me how big and brave you are, just like your dad was." Algie

smiled at Neville, who looked back up at the tall shelf nervously. Then, he waddled over and, after a bit of hesitation, tried to climb up to the third shelf. Just he reached the edge where the Babbity Rabbit book was, Algie pulled out his wand.

"This is for you, Reginald," he whispered as he cast a spell at the heavy bookcase, which suddenly tipped over onto Neville. The toddler fell to the floor with the bookcase poised to crush him ... when suddenly it froze in mid-fall and then tipped back into place, with all the books and knick-knacks that had been on it snapping back into place as if they'd never moved. All except the Babbity Rabbit book which Neville proudly clutched in his hands.

Algie stared at Neville with his eyes wide in astonishment. Then, from some distance away, he heard Augusta call out. "Algie, what was that noise? Is Neville getting into mischief."

"It was nothing, Gussie." Then, he hissed out a strong Memory Charm to make Neville forget what had just happened, followed maliciously by a mild Stinging Hex on the boy's bottom. Neville soon began crying. Just as Algie put his wand away, Augusta came around the corner. "It looks like Neville tried to climb up the bookshelf to get his Babbity Rabbit book and then fell on his bum. No harm done."

Augusta swept into the room and picked the child up off the floor to console him. "Neville, I've told you! Don't try to climb the furniture! You could have pulled the whole thing down on your head! Get someone to hand you things you can't reach!"

"Or perhaps even *summon* them to you with magic," said Algie brightly, but Augusta just gave him a dirty look, while Neville sobbed softly. "Oh, don't give me that look, Gussie. The boy's three. Frank had toys flying around the room at that age. Has he shown any signs of accidental magic at all?"

She hesitated. "No, but he's still a child, Algie."

"Well, he won't be one forever, Augusta. If he hasn't shown any magic by the time he's four, we may need to..." He hesitated as Augusta gave him a nearly homicidal glare and then smiled winningly at the child and his guardian. "Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, I suppose."

When Neville was four years old ...

It was a beautiful spring day as little Neville Longbottom dashed across a sunlight field in pursuit of a brilliant colorful butterfly. It was no ordinary butterfly, however. Indeed, it was no butterfly at all, but an illusion created and controlled by Algie, who watched from a distance as the butterfly construct danced and wove just out of Neville's reach. Step by step, the butterfly led Neville closer and closer to Greenhouse 4. The whole Longbottom family had come for a weekend getaway at the summer home in Wales which was situated on a working farm where various magical plants and animals were raised. Greenhouse 4 was a large secured structure where the dangerous plants were housed, plants that were poisonous, carnivorous or both. Normally, Greenhouse 4 was kept locked down, but unfortunately, Catesby, the Chief Gardener, was getting on in years and didn't always remember to lock up completely. Particularly not after he had been hit with a Confundus Curse, which was why the door was currently wide open.

The magical butterfly continued its flight, leading little Neville straight into Greenhouse 4. Algie took a deep breath and braced himself for the screams. "It's all for you, Reginald," he whispered. But the screams never came. Instead, he could barely hear a soft, childish ... giggling? Swiftly, he ran to Greenhouse 4 and through the doorway. Inside, he was stunned by the scene, as Neville was laughing in delight while two *Devil's Snare* tossed him back and forth and caught him as if they were playing a game! And in the background, an entire row of Venomous Tentacula were brushing their vines back and forth against each other as if they were ... *clapping*?!

Algie wiped his eyes as though he might be hallucinating. Then, he drew Neville to his arms with a Summoning Charm. At that point, the plants of Greenhouse 4 registered their disapproval by lashing out towards Algie with a dozen deadly vines. He slammed the door shut and then hit it with his strongest locking spell as the aggressive plants bashed against the door repeatedly.

"That was fun!" said Neville gleefully. Algie looked down at his excited nephew who seemed no worse the wear for his time spent surrounded by some of the deadliest plants in the world. He snarled at the boy.

"OBLIVIATE!"

When Neville Longbottom was seven...

Algie watched from a distance through his omnoculars as Augusta led her grandson down the Blackpool Promenade. His birthday had coincided with a weekend, so she had taken the boy to Blackpool to see the Muggle zoo and amusement park and to reminisce about days gone by. Her first date with Archie was to Blackpool Tower the summer

after their Fifth Year. Decades later, Frank had carried Alice to Blackpool for their honeymoon.

It had been a long hot day, so Augusta and Neville stopped off at a malt shop and then sat down at a table outside to drink their milkshakes. After a few seconds, Augusta leaned over to her grandson. "Neville, I need to step into the lady's powder room for just a few minutes. Can I trust you to wait right here till I get back?"

"Yes, Gran," he said respectfully.

Wrapped up in Notice-Me-Not and Muggle-Repelling Charms, Algie glided through the Muggle crowd like a shark until he was standing behind the oblivious Neville. He placed his wand just behind the boy's head. "**OBLIVIATE**," he whispered. "Your grandmother has stepped away for a while but she said to wait for your Uncle Algie to come for you." Neville's head wavered back and forth for a few seconds. Then, Algie tapped him on the shoulder, and the boy jerked in surprise and then looked up at his great-uncle and regent.

"Un...uncle Algie! I ... didn't see you there," the boy said timidly. Algie smiled. If nothing else, all the Memory Charms were wrecking the boy's confidence.

"Quite alright, my boy. But we need to move along now. We're in a bit of a hurry."

"But Gran..."

"She knows where we're going and will catch us up. Now don't dawdle!"

With that, the boy stood up and took Algie's hand. The older wizard led the boy away quickly before his grandmother

could return. A few minutes later, they were walking down Blackpool Pier taking in the sights. At the end of the pier, Algie put up some stronger Muggle-Repelling Charms to keep anyone from interfering.

"Now, Neville, I've brought you here for a very important reason. Can you guess what it is?"

The boy shook his head no.

"Well, today is your seventh birthday, and that's a very important magical number. You see, it's very unusual and very troubling that you haven't shown any magic yet. Your Gran is afraid that you might be a squib, and as your regent, that's something I have to be concerned about. Do you know what a squib is, Neville?"

The boy nodded sadly. "It's a wizarding child with no magic. Does ... does Gran really think I'm a squib?"

"Yes, Neville, she's told me so many times. But if you're very brave, we can prove her wrong. Can you be brave for me? Just like your mum and dad were?"

The boy nodded again, this time urgently. "I'll do whatever you say if it will show I have magic, Uncle Algie."

"Good, good. Now, one last question, Neville. Can you swim?"

The boy barely had time shake his head no before Algie snatched him up and threw him off the pier. Neville hit the water with a loud splash and immediately cried out, but with the charms Algie had set up, no one could hear him.

"It's all right, Neville, don't panic. Just relax and let the magic happen." Algie smiled at the drowning boy. That was,

of course, the worst possible advice to give to a drowning wizarding child, as accidental magic was most likely to occur while the child was in a state of panic. Of course, it was unlikely the boy could even hear Algie over the pounding surf washing over him, filling his mouth and nose with sea water. Neville's head went under water once, twice, thrice ... and then suddenly, his whole body rose out of the water, lifted on a swirling water spout. Neville coughed out some sea water and then looked around in amazement.

"I'm doing it, Uncle Algie! I'm doing magic!" he cried out joyfully.

"Naturally," muttered Algie. Then, he gave a casual flick of his wand and whispered the word "**LACERO**," and a Cutting Curse sliced clean through the bottom of the water spout, disrupting it. Neville yelled in a panic as he plunged back into the churning waters of the Irish Sea. He bobbed back up after a few seconds, coughing up sea water once more.

"Uncle Algie! Help!"

"It's alright, lad. You're doing fine!" He wasn't, of course. The boy was clearly on the verge of drowning. Then, to Algie's consternation, the boy started rising up out of the water *again*! Algie prepared another Cutting Curse, when he was distracted by a woman's voice screaming Neville's name. He turned around and saw Augusta running as fast as she could towards the end of the pier her wand already out. The wizard cursed her timing. He could destroy the second waterspout, but there was no way the boy would drown before Gussie arrived to save him. He turned back to Neville and instead hit him with a Memory Charm just strong enough to erase the last few minutes. Then, he

loudly exclaimed "***ACCIO NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM!***" The dazed child shot up out of the collapsing water spout into his arms, where he rested for barely a second before a furious Augusta tore Neville away from him.

"WHAT IN MERLIN'S NAME DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!" she screamed at Algie.

"Calm yourself, Gussie, I had the situation perfectly under control," said Algie smoothly.

"Under control?! You were trying to drown him!"

"I was placing the boy in an admittedly threatening situation but under controlled circumstances in the hopes that he would call upon his magic to save himself. Several of my friends growing up first revealed their magic from being thrown into the deep end, as it were. It's as good a way to learn to swim as any, I think. Sadly, it's been seven years and not even the threat of drowning has made his magic manifest. I know you're the boy's guardian and you care for him a great deal, as do I. But I am the Regent Longbottom. I have responsibilities to the entire family that trump my feelings for one little boy who is tragically disabled."

"I don't want you anywhere near Neville ever again, Algie," Augusta said coldly.

"I don't think that's your decision to make, Gussie. Not unless you wish to challenge my regency before the Wizengamot, and I don't think they're likely to take the side of a seven-year-old with no magic." He took a step towards her as she hugged the shivering boy. "You forget who you're speaking to, Gussie. And you forget by whose grace you're allowed to remain at Longbottom Manor."

"Sometimes, *Regent*, I don't think you're that concerned about *the family* at all. Sometimes, I think you're still just holding a childish grudge over Archie's old teddy bear."

Algie's eyes flashed dangerously. Then, he smiled. "If you disapprove of my methods of getting the boy to show his magic, then come up with your own. After all," he continued mercilessly while staring right into Neville's eyes, "you think he's a squib as much as I do. Now, I suggest you take the boy home for some dry clothes. He'll catch his death out here like this." Algie smiled once more and then apparated away.

Meet the Longbottoms (pt 2)

Chapter Notes

AN: Possible Trigger Warning. This chapter contains scenes involving violence directed at a child. No one is actually injured, but it may be disturbing for some readers.

CHAPTER 16: Meet the Longbottoms (pt 2)

When Neville Longbottom was eight...

"Hello, Neville."

Neville jumped up out of his chair at the sound of Algie's voice. "Oh... Uncle Algie! I... didn't know you were here today."

"It's your birthday, Neville. Surely you didn't think I would skip it. Here, I brought you a plate of meringues." Algie took one off the platter and bit into it. "They're delicious. Your cousin Enid made them."

Neville looked at the platter of meringues for a few seconds without touching them. "Gran says I shouldn't stay in a room alone with you," he finally said in a quiet voice.

"Why not?"

"She says you may try to hurt me in order to make me use my magic."

"Yes, Neville, I very well might. Tell me, Neville. What do you think will happen if it turns out you are a squib?"

"I dunno. I guess I won't go to Hogwarts."

"That's right. Hogwarts doesn't take squibs. But that's three years from now. Three years of not knowing. Of wondering every day if you're worthy of the name Longbottom. And even if you get a letter, it might be that you have just barely enough magic to get in, but not enough to pass your OWLS. And if you fail those, you'll be judged a squib just as surely as if you'd never gotten a letter at all. That's another *five* years of wondering and waiting and worrying. Eight years total - that's as long as you've been alive so far. Another eight years total of looking in the mirror every day and seeing a failure. Another eight years of visiting your parents every holiday wondering if you're unworthy to be their son."

Neville didn't answer at first, but he shivered and blinked his eyes furiously at Algie's words. "Why are you saying these things?" he asked finally.

"Because your parents were great wizards and heroes to our society, and I think that if I were in your shoes, I'd rather die than embarrass them by being a worthless squib. And for that reason, I've come to make this offer. If you let me test your magic one more time, I promise it will be the last, one way or another. If you succeed and show your magic, no one will be prouder than me and I will support you with everything I have. But if you refuse me this test and are later judged a squib after dragging things out for years and years, I will hold it against you. When I am Lord Longbottom, I will expel you from the family and leave you with nothing. Whether you're eleven or sixteen, you'll be out on the street, homeless with no prospects and no education. And not just you. I'll send your grandmother packing as well. If you're not a Longbottom, then *she* has no further right to this house. She'll get her dowry, of course.

That will be enough for a small flat in some tiny magical village and basic living expenses, I suppose. But if you take my test, whatever the result, I promise you that she'll be taken care of in the manner to which she's become accustomed."

"What if I take the test and fail?"

"Well," said Algie kindly, "at least you won't have to live with shaming your parents anymore."

Neville swallowed and looked down at the floor. He wiped at his eyes and then looked back up at the man who was supposed to watch over and protect him. "What do you want me to do?"

"It's a simple test, Neville. We're on the fourth floor of the Manor. There's a window right behind you. Just step out of the window. If magic saves you, you're a wizard. If it doesn't, you're free of guilt and shame and worry, and your Gran gets taken care of. Nothing simpler."

Neville backed away from Algie and towards the open window. Honestly, it was true what Algie had said. People had been waiting on him to show magic for so long, and it never came. He heard the whispers of his cousins and their friends - "*Squib*." Even at the age of eight, he'd been taught that without magic, he was a blight on the Longbottom line and a disgrace to his parents. He looked down from the window and felt dizzy for a moment. It was a long way down to the cobblestones below.

Behind him, Algie stood with bated breath. His research into squibs finally gave him this new and monstrous idea. Accidental magic usually activated when the child was afraid for his life, but it likely would not if the child knowingly and deliberately placed himself in danger, nor

was it likely to manifest if the child's will to live was weak. Neville had defied Algie before, but if he voluntarily jumped out of that window, there would be no freak magical outburst to save him this time.

Neville slipped one leg over the threshold, but before he could put the other over, he looked down again and saw his grandmother in the distance, walking the grounds with one of her friends. Neville knew she thought he was a squib. He guessed that she probably thought he was an embarrassment to his parents' memory. But above all, Neville knew she loved him and that she would not want him to do this. He turned back to Algie.

"You said if I do this you'll look after Gran. Why should I believe you? If I die, no one will remember your promise."

"Neville, my boy. When have I ever lied to you?"

Neville stared at Algie as if seeing him for the very first time. Then, he felt something stir deep in the pit of his stomach, something that, three years later, a wise old hat would recognize as Gryffindor courage. "I think you're lying to me right now. I don't think you want me to show magic at all. I think you just want me to die." Then, he turned the other way and began screaming. "GRAN! GRAN! UNCLE ALGIE IS HERE! HE'S TRYING..."

"**OBLIVIATE!**" Neville rocked back and forth in a daze, half in and half out of the window. Algie rushed forward, grabbed him by the leg, and shoved him forward until he was dangling out the window, held aloft by nothing but Algie's tight grasp. In the distance, Augusta ran forward, screaming Neville's name while her companion followed behind. Neville shook off his momentary confusion and looked up at his uncle, who merely smiled at him.

"I do wish you would have tried at least one of Cousin Enid's meringues before it came to this. They really are quite delicious." Then, he let go.

Neville dropped like a stone. In the distance, Augusta screamed in horror, but she was too far to cast a spell. The boy looked down at the approaching cobblestone driveway and braced for the end. Instead, there was a slight shudder ... and then, he was airborne again, spinning madly through the air. He came down again some distance away and felt another shudder. This time he didn't fly so high, and the confused boy finally realized that he was ... *bouncing*? His third and final bounce brought him down near his grandmother who used a charm to catch him safely.

Algie watched the entire scene with a crazed grin on his face. He'd gone for broke, but the Brat survived. Even from the fourth floor, Algie could tell that Augusta was glaring up at him with a look of vicious triumph. Worse, as she and her companion drew closer, he could see that the other woman was Griselda Marchbanks, an old friend of Augusta's and an esteemed member of the Wizengamot ... and now an impartial and irreproachable witness to Neville showing accidental magic. "Naturally," Algie said, before he started giggling to himself. Still laughing, he moved back to the table and picked up a few meringues to munch on. He looked around Neville's room wildly as he chewed the confectionaries before he finally snatched up the plate and threw it against the wall.

"Alright, *Brat!* You may be *Heir Presumptive*, but I'm not done with you yet!" He took a few moments to compose himself. Then, Algie went downstairs to congratulate Neville on his tremendous feat of magic and to let Madame Marchbanks know how grateful he was that someone of her stature was on hand to serve as witness. By then, other

guests had come out to see what had happened, and he took the lead in announcing that Neville had finally showed accidental magic and was now the Heir Presumptive. He doubted Augusta had bought his routine, but he didn't much care. He still had three years before Neville's Hogwarts letter came, and that meant he still had one card left to play.

When Neville Longbottom was eleven...

In the three years since Neville's "official" demonstration of magic, Algie had worked ceaselessly to reassure the boy and his grandmother that he supported Neville as Heir Presumptive, that his only concern had been about the boy's magic, and that he certainly harbored no homicidal intentions. He had showered the boy with gifts and "grandfatherly advice" and given every appearance of being a doting regent who looked forward to handing over the Longbottom estates to Neville just as soon as his OWLS came back.

The truth, of course, was that Algie was playing a waiting game. Neville's OWLS were his last chance. If the boy failed to pass at least one of his three wand-based exams – Charms, Transfiguration or DADA – Algie had grounds to petition the Wizengamot that he met the technical definition of squib even though he'd been magical enough for a Hogwarts letter. So with that in mind, Algie set himself to the task of figuring out how to ensure that Neville failed academically. The wand classes were the ones that mattered, and so the wand was where Algie focused his attention.

As Neville's eleventh birthday approached, he and Augusta corresponded about when to pick up Neville's school supplies, and Algie pointed out that, as regent, he was the

one with the key to the vault, which he should really show Neville anyway. Augusta acquiesced but also asked if Algie would pick up the family Rememberall for Neville. She was worried about him going to school with so many children of Death Eaters.

When the two arrived in Diagon Alley, the boy was most eager to get his wand – he'd talked of nothing else ever since his letter came – so Algie carried him first to Ollivander's. The old man remembered Algie instantly, as well as his wand from all those years ago. Surprisingly, given Ollivander's reputation, Neville found his own wand almost immediately. This, according to the wand seller, was because he'd been supplying Longbottoms with their wands for ages, and he knew the family's preferences from experience. Neville's wand was thirteen inches and cherry, with a unicorn hair core. "Exactly like your father before you," he said.

Algie crooked an eyebrow. "Exactly? Does that mean he could use his father's own wand?" He looked down at the boy. "I mean, we can certainly afford a new wand, but it might be a way to show respect for his father if he could use Frank's old one."

Ollivander looked horrified. "Certainly not! A wand chooses the wizard, not the wizard's family. And besides, unicorn hair wands are intensely loyal. A unicorn wand that had chosen one wizard would likely never work as well for another, not even a family member. And while the father is still alive? That could even be dangerous for the boy's magic. He might as well try to shove his magic through a brick!"

"Ah! Well, never mind then," said Algie jovially, as though he had not been researching the topic of incompatible wands

for three years. "We certainly wouldn't want *that!*"

Algie paid for the wand and then pocketed it. "You can see it when we get home, Neville. You're not supposed to use it now anyway, and I won't have you embarrassing the family with underage magic," he said to the disappointed boy. Then, he escorted Neville to Flourish & Botts, to Madame Malkin's, and eventually to Gringotts. There, he led Neville first to his trust vault, which he linked up to a moleskin pouch so that the boy would have a small weekly allowance while at school. Then, he took the boy down further to where the family vaults lay. Once inside the Longbottom family vault, he took care to point out certain interesting features and then told Neville to look around but not touch anything, as it might take him a few minutes to find the Rememberall.

In fact, he knew perfectly well that Frank's old Remembarall was not in the vault, as he'd disposed of it earlier. Instead, Algie spent those minutes at a small display case which contained the wands of dozens of deceased Longbottom scions each with a small placard denoting the name, date, and manner of the wand owner's death (or in Frank's case, incapacity). Frank's wand was near the top, and he snatched it up and compared it to Neville's. They looked nearly identical. He put Frank's wand in one pocket and Neville's in another.

"Oh, damn. The blasted thing's not here! Ah well, let's head on. I'll send the house elves to search for it at the Manor." Neville, who did not especially care about the Rememberall, was fine with that, and the two left to finish their shopping before a delightful lunch at Summerisle's, capped with a truly gigantic slice of chocolate cake with a candle on top for Neville's birthday. Then, he took the boy home and let him show off his new presents, including his wand, to

Augusta. He also informed Augusta that there was no Rememberall in the vault and suggested it must be in the Manor somewhere.

Soon, September 1st had arrived, and Algie returned to Longbottom Manor bright and early. Augusta grilled him briefly about the Rememberall, but he assured her it wasn't in the vault. He even offered to swear an oath, but she told him to stop being silly and then left to see to their transportation to the rail station. Had it come down to it, Algie *could* have sworn an oath that there was no Rememberall in the vault because he'd already removed it. He could even swear he didn't know where it was, since he'd thrown it into the Thames and had no clue where the current would take it.

Algie headed upstairs to Neville's room, donning a pair of gloves as he went. The door was open, and Neville was inside finishing up his packing. "Neville, my boy. Have you got everything ready for Hogwarts?"

The boy jumped slightly. "Oh, you startled me, Uncle Algie! Yes, sir, I'm nearly ready." The boy was still a bit nervous around Algie and probably always would be, but he tried not to show it.

"Good, good. And you've got your wand?" Algie asked. The boy smiled and pulled it out for his uncle to see. "Excellent. And before we leave, I've got a special treat for you – a pet to keep you company at Hogwarts. His name... is Trevor." He reached into a pocket of his overcoat with a gloved hand and produced a fairly large toad wriggling furiously in his grasp.

Neville's eyes had lit up when Algie mentioned a treat, but he was less enthused by the struggling amphibian that this

uncle was holding out to him. With a smile but a bit of reluctance, Neville reached out and took the slimy creature, which nearly slipped out of his grasp.

"Better use both hands until he gets used to you, Neville." The boy nodded, turned and set his wand down so that he could hold Trevor in one hand and stroke him with the other in a futile effort to calm the toad down. While he was distracted, Algie pulled out his own wand and took a deep breath before casting the strongest and most complicated Memory Charm he had used to date. More than a mere Obliviate, it also incorporated elements of a Confundus Curse. Neville's knees shook and nearly buckled, but he didn't fall. Algie reached over to take the boy's wand and hold it in front of his face.

"Listen carefully, Neville. You will forget this wand. You've never seen it before. We didn't go to Ollivander's and get you a new wand." Algie pocketed Neville's wand and then produced the one that had belonged to Frank. "*This* is your wand, as it was your father's before you. Your Gran *insisted* that you use your father's wand as a way to honor him. You made her *cry for hours* when you even suggested that you wanted a wand of your own, and you promised you would never ask her again. And now, you will take this wand, and use it as best you can. If it doesn't work well for you, it's because your magic is weak and you'll just have to try harder. In fact, you will push yourself until it hurts if that's what it takes to get magic out of this wand. Nod, if you understand." Neville nodded in a daze.

"You will also want to keep Trevor with you at all times. If you lose him, you will be very upset until you get him back. You will want to hold him whenever possible." Trevor was a late addition to Algie's scheme – the toad was from a South American species that was mildly poisonous. Not enough to

make Neville sick – well, not unless he decided to lick the thing – but long term exposure would interfere with both the boy's memory and magic. The whole scheme was a desperate gamble, but it only had to work for five years, less if the boy got so frustrated he flunked out of Hogwarts ... or killed himself by trying to force his magic through an incompatible wand.

"Finally, you will forget everything your grandmother ever mentioned about Rememberalls. It's a useless thing to help stupid forgetful boys remember what they've forgotten. Don't pay it any mind." That last command was an afterthought, just in case Neville somehow came across someone else's Rememberall at school, as unlikely as that seemed. His work done, Algie stepped back and put his wand away. After a few seconds, Neville blinked a few times and looked up at Algie. "I'm sorry, Uncle... What were we talking about?"

"About how you'll be writing to me every week, Neville, to let me know how you're doing." Algie smiled. "I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward hearing about all your successes."

When Neville Longbottom was eleven... and three months...

They came just before dawn. Algie was sound asleep, curled up on the left side of his bed (after all these years, he still left Wendy's side untouched), when Lubby, his chief house elf, woke him with a few gentle coughs.

"Begging master's pardon, sir, but there be three aurors at the door who wish to speak with you. They says they has warrant for your arrest. Something to do with young master Neville."

"Oh. I see. Naturally," said Algie in a tight voice. "Well, tell them I'll be down just as soon as I get dressed."

Lubby nodded and disappeared with a pop. Algie rubbed his eyes and picked his wand up off the bedside table. Idly, he wondered why the Aurors were being so considerate as to send a house elf to retrieve him instead of kicking down door. Then, with a thought, he reached out to feel the status of his wards. Ah! The defensive wards were all down, and in their place were anti-apparation and anti-portkey wards. Also, the Floo connection was inactive. They could afford to politely wait because they knew he wasn't going anywhere. And, he supposed, they had chosen to wait in hopes that he would save them all a lot of paperwork by doing "The Honorable Thing."

Algie closed his eyes and slowly lifted the wand to his temple. Then, he tried to summon enough hate to use the Killing Curse on himself. But for all the attempted murders he'd made over the last nine years, he didn't really have any hatred for Neville or anyone else, just a pitiful selfish jealousy mixed with a bitter self-loathing, neither of which was enough to fuel the Killing Curse. When the Aurors finally got tired of waiting and came for him, they found Algernon Longbottom still in bed, in a fetal position, weeping like a child.

Interlude by the Lake Shore

When the Aurors finally got tired of waiting and came for him, they found Algernon Longbottom still in bed, in a fetal position, weeping like a child.

CHAPTER 17: Interlude by the Lake Shore

4 November 1991

Harry could only stare at Neville in barely-concealed horror as other boy calmly recounted the various incidents in which his uncle had tampered with his memories, usually in the aftermath of a failed murder attempt. The two were sitting together on the bank of the Black Lake just after lunch on the afternoon of Neville's return to school.

Amazingly, the truth had only come out by sheer dumb luck: Augusta Longbottom, annoyed at the apparent loss of the Longbottom family Rememberall, wrote to her cousin Barty Crouch Sr. and asked if she could borrow his old one for Neville's use (hence its old-fashioned design). Crouch Sr. had no surviving heirs of his own, and in light of the **reason** he had no surviving heirs, he could hardly refuse Augusta's request to borrow the expensive but no longer useful antique. Algie had no idea that Neville had acquired a Rememberall until the aurors came for him. He blustered a bit at first, but when he learned that Neville had supplied certified pensieve copies of his recovered memories, he broke down and confessed.

"So, what's going to happen to him?" asked Harry. "Will there be a trial?"

Neville shook his head. "Gran and I ... spent a lot of time talking about it. She wanted him dragged before the

Wizengamot in chains."

"But not you."

He sighed. "After everything, I don't really ... hate Uncle Algie. I'm... disgusted by him, but I'm not going to waste the effort of hatred. And besides, his children and grandchildren didn't know anything about what he'd been doing. He confirmed that under Veritaserum. Reginald and Enid are both fine people with families of their own, and they've always been very good to me. They love their father and don't deserve to be publicly shamed with a scandal like that. Plus, what he did would have been worth twenty years in Azkaban at least, and at his age, he wouldn't have lasted six months. I don't think I could ever face them if I'd sent their father to die a miserable slow death at the hands of Dementors."

Harry looked away for a few seconds. He had no idea what it was like to have family worth caring about ... or one that cared about him. It was ... baffling. "So what *will* happen," he asked.

"We have a plea agreement that is magically sanctioned and under seal with the DMLE. He steps down as my regent in favor of Gran. He turns all of his British and continental business interests over to his children, and he swears a Unbreakable Vow that he will never again directly or indirectly try to harm me or anyone under my protection or otherwise try to interfere with the affairs of House Longbottom. Then, he will retire to manage a mandrake farm in the Australian Outback with a single house elf and a small monthly stipend. And if he ever sets foot on British soil again, he gets prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Which, in light of his confession, will probably be a Dementor's Kiss."

"No offense, Neville," said Harry, "but you're taking this awfully well."

"Says the guy who laughed at a Howler in front of the whole school," he replied with a chuckle. "I know I should be furious, and, I dunno, maybe at some point it will hit me. But right now... All my life, I thought I was nothing, a squib, a disgrace to my parents' memory. I hated myself so much I nearly let Algie talk me into suicide when I was *eight*. But to find out that it wasn't *me*, that I could do magic the whole time, but I was being ... sabotaged. Honestly, the sheer relief is just crowding everything else."

He grinned almost infectiously and pulled out his wand – *his* wand, the one the aurors had recovered from the Longbottom vault where Algie had hidden it – and pointed it at a nearby rock. "**WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!**" he intoned. The rock shot off like a cannon, emitting a trail of smoke and sparks behind it, and landed in the middle of the lake. Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise, while Neville coughed bashfully.

"Um, yeah, Professor Flitwick said to be careful about that. Apparently, two months of 'shoving my magic through a brick' as Ollivander put it means that I've gotten used to overpowering my spells. I'll have to dial everything back a bit and learn some finesse or I'll be setting things on fire all over the place."

The two laughed for a bit and then watched the lake in silence for a bit. In the distance, the Giant Squid raised a lazy tentacle as if waving at them and then submerged.

"I envy you, Neville."

Neville's head jerked around in shock.

Harry continued without taking his eyes off the lake. "I know it was awful what your uncle did to you. But your Gran loves you and will look after you. And it sounds like all those cousins are decent folk, and you still like them. You've got a family that you don't hate. I envy you that more than I can say."

"Do you ... do you think that you could ever forgive the Potters for what they did?"

"No," he said instantly. "And it wouldn't matter if I could, because none of them even realize they did something that needs forgiveness. James is still trying to strip me of my heir status. Jim thinks I'm a future Dark Lord. And Lily just completely ignores me." He was quiet for a moment. "And besides, sometimes I think I need the hate to keep me going. I'm ... not as good as you are."

Neville made a face. "Now what does *that* mean?! You're the smartest bloke I know, you helped save me from a troll, and you're making plans for taking over the Wizengamot at the age of eleven. I'd be useless if it weren't for you, if not dead."

"Well, first off, Hermione's a lot smarter than either of us. Second, we all saved each other from the troll. And third, our Wizengamot seats are a long way off." Harry looked down at the ground and rocked back and forth slightly as if weighing a decision. Then, he pulled out his wand.

"MUFLIATO."

"What was ...?"

"Privacy charm. Hermione found it somewhere." Harry scratched behind his ear nervously, while Neville waited patiently. "When I say I'm not as good as you, I'm not

talking about magic or schoolwork or any of that. I'm talking about ..." He paused and shook his head. Then, he laid back on the grass and looked up at the sky while struggling to express himself. "When I was little, I used to imagine my parents. The Dursleys said they'd died, and I accepted that. People die and leave their children as orphans. It happens. But they also said my parents were worthless horrible people, and I just refused to believe that bit. I liked to imagine that my mother was beautiful and my father was brave and, I dunno, that they both died heroically saving my life or something, and that one day, I'd do something great and prove to the world that their sacrifice wasn't in vain. But that was when I was a little kid. Over time, I had all that beaten out of me, literally and figuratively."

He looked over at Neville. "I know what it's like to feel worthless, Neville. If my parents had really been dead and Dumbledore had sent someone else to fetch me, I'd have never believed that I could be something as incredible as a wizard. How could I be? I was just ... Harry. And I'd have accepted whatever rubbish I was fed about Hogwarts and my parents and I'd have probably gone into Gryffindor for all the wrong reasons and been a complete outsider. *And I certainly* would not have spent a whole month cramming about etiquette and Wizengamot law in order to fit in around here. I'd just have shown up for the train and been completely hopeless."

His expression hardened.

"But ... they weren't dead. James showed up and told me everything *including* the fact that I had an identical twin who they'd put on a pedestal while throwing me into the gutter. And I was just so ... angry! Because it felt like everything I'd been through had been for no reason at all.

Like a big joke. So I decided then and there that I would not be 'just Harry.' That whatever it took, I would *make* James and Lily Potter realize that they picked the wrong son to throw out with the garbage."

"You know," said Neville softly. "It's not very Slytherin of you to reveal such personal details, especially to a Gryffindor."

Harry snorted. "Oh, I *am* definitely a Slytherin, Neville. Meek earnest insecure 'just Harry' is gone for good. Slytherin Harry is cunning, he's ambitious, and he's a bit ruthless and manipulative and occasionally even cruel. And it's been hatred for the Potters that's turned me into him. But ... I don't want that hatred to eat me up, like it did your Uncle. I don't want to end up ... evil, like a Dark Lord or something ridiculous like that. I need... I need a compass."

Neville crooked his head. "A compass?"

Harry looked deeply into his friend's eyes. "A moral compass, Neville. When I said I wasn't as good as you, I meant ... that I'm not as good a person as you are." Neville tried to interrupt but Harry stopped him. "No, seriously, I *mean* it. You had someone who had tried to *kill* you completely at your mercy. If I'd been in your shoes, Algernon Longbottom would be in a cell waiting for his Dementor's Kiss, and I'd have insisted on a front row seat to watch it! But instead, you took pity on a would-be murderer because you felt sorry for his kids and grandkids, and you gave him a house in another country and a job and even money to retire on. This may not seem like it means much because most of the people in my life have been completely awful, but ... you're easily the best human being I've ever known. And that's why I need you to be my friend, Neville. Because I want you to watch after me. And if I ever start to fall into real darkness..."

"You'll have me there to catch you and pull you back," replied Neville simply.

Harry relaxed and smiled. The two looked back towards the lake at the sound of some more antics from the Squid.

"Mind you, I *am* still planning on making the Potters pay for what they did to me," said Harry after a long pause.

"No death, dismemberment or permanent injuries," Neville replied with mock sternness.

"What about public humiliation and financial ruin?" Harry asked.

"Oh, that's fine. I'll even help with that," Neville said genially.

The two laughed as the waters of Black Lake lapped against the shore.

HP&POS 18: Quidditch and Mayhem

CHAPTER 18: Quidditch and Mayhem

15 November 1991

The first Quidditch match of the season looked to be even more dramatic than Harry had expected what with the traditional rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin *plus* the involvement of the Git-Who-Lived and the drama which always surrounded him. The rival captains, Oliver Wood for the Lions and Marcus Flint for the Snakes, hated each other with a violent passion. The Gryffs had better teamwork but an untested Seeker. The Slytherins had stronger individual players but poor coordination and a strong preference for brute force over efficient game play. Terence Higgs was a highly competent and experienced Seventh Year Seeker who had been undefeated the previous two seasons, but Flint (in his first year as captain) literally had to be beg him to come back and play during his NEWTS year. The Chasers were Flint and Pucey (both talented veterans), plus Graham Montague, Rodney's little brother who was a Second Year new to the team. Keeper Miles Bletchley was also a Second Year and equally inexperienced. Overall, while the team had dominated the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup for the last several seasons, this would probably be a rebuilding year. The battle plan, as Harry understood it, was to bully the Gryffs and keep them off balance and then let Higgs find the Snitch while Jim was still trying to figure out which end of the broom was the front.

For the first fifteen minutes or so, the Snakes dominated 40-10 when there was a sudden commotion centered on Jim. The boy seemed to have lost control of his broom,

which was shaking madly as if it were trying to throw him off. Harry watched his brother through a set of omnoculars with ... not concern so much as curiosity, as if he couldn't quite divine the purpose of what he was seeing.

"It looks like someone has hexed Potter's broom!" exclaimed Theo. "I didn't think that was possible!"

"It shouldn't be," said Blaise Zabini who was sitting nearby. "Granted, whoever is doing it is an idiot. All they're doing is shaking Potter's broom hard. You'd think they'd just turn off the broom's enchantments and let him fall."

"No," said Harry calmly. "The person responsible is exceptionally powerful and cunning. He's just facing unexpected opposition." Harry had turned his omnoculars away from his brother's plight towards that section of the stands where the faculty and guests were seated. His birth parents were both there, as James had come to Hogwarts for his son's inaugural performance which now looked to be a disaster in the making. He, Lily and several other teachers already had their wands out ready to catch Jim if he fell. Behind them all, Harry could see his prime suspect, Quirrell, whose eyes were fixed and unblinking as he subvocalized some spell. Snape sat a few rows behind him, doing the same. Clearly, one was jinxing Jim's broom and the other was casting a counter-jinx.

Suddenly, to Harry's surprise, Hermione showed up in the faculty-visitor stands, forcefully pushing her way through the crowd. At one point, she bumped into Quirrell, practically bowling the man over. Harry spared a glance back up at Jim and saw that his broom stabilized almost instantly. Then, he looked back at the faculty stands in time to see Hermione dart down the tunnel just past where Snape was still sitting. A few seconds later, the Potions

Master jumped up in alarm, as the hem of his robes had somehow caught fire.

Harry laughed. "Oh, that's my girl. That is priceless! Comedy gold!" He looked back at Quirrell who was distracted by both Snape's efforts to stamp out the fire and the resultant jostling of the crowd. Finally, shouts from the Slytherins around him brought his attention back to the match. The Git had apparently seen the Snitch and gone into a power dive. Unfortunately, Higgs was on the far side of the stadium when Potter made his move, and though he desperately skillfully winded his way through the other players to catch up with Potter, it was too late. Near the ground, Jim lost control of his broom and crashed into the ground, which would have been hilarious if the Git hadn't managed to nearly swallow the Snitch while tumbling across the turf. Flint was almost berserk as, according to him, the rules clearly called for the Snitch to be caught by hand and not by mouth. Madame Hooch, who had little love for the Slytherins' style of game play, disagreed and called the game in favor of the Gryffindors.

Leaving the pitch, Harry noticed in the distance that the Potters were with Dumbledore gesturing angrily at the old man, while Snape followed close behind walking with as much dignity as he could muster with smoldering robes. Closer by, Harry saw the groundskeeper, Hagrid, escorting an injured Jim to his hut, with Hermione, Neville and Ron following behind. Harry headed towards that direction but soon realized that Theo and, to his surprise, Blaise Zabini, were following him. Theo was expected, but Zabini was a new development.

"Can I help you, Mr. Zabini?"

The other boy smiled. "I hope so, Mr. Potter. A few weeks back, you invited me to join Miss Granger's study sessions. I declined at the time, but I find myself disappointed with my progress in several classes. I was wondering if your invitation was still open?"

Harry, who knew perfectly well that Blaise was one of his closest academic rivals in Slytherin House and that he didn't need the least bit of tutoring, raised his chin and crooked an eyebrow. "Can you resist the temptation to insult anyone's parentage for several hours at a time?" he said archly.

"If everyone can go that long without insulting my own parentage, then certainly," he replied evenly.

Harry stared at the boy for several seconds, almost long enough to make it uncomfortable for all concerned. One thing he'd learned since his Sorting was that there were two kinds of Slytherins: the ones with bigotries ... and the ones with agendas. He strongly suspected Zabini of being the latter, but wasn't sure what sort of agenda it was. So he decided to test a theory he'd been developing since Halloween.

"Then let us agree ... to be excellent to each other, Mr. Zabini" he said.

The other boy inhaled sharply, as if Harry Potter had just publicly exposed one of Zabini's deepest, darkest secrets, one that he had never shared with another living soul. Then, he composed himself ... and smiled warmly.

"Party on, Mr. Potter," he replied as the two reached out and shook hands.

Theo looked back and forth between the two during the odd exchange. "Was ... was that ... a *code* of some kind?" he asked in confusion.

"Of a sort," said Harry. "By the way, I do hope you will call me Harry from now on, Mr. Zabini."

"Only if you will both call me Blaise."

"Certainly. I'll discuss the matter with Hermione, but I doubt it will be a problem. We meet on Tuesdays after last period and Fridays after lunch," said Harry.

"I look forward to it," said Blaise before offering a slight bow and heading towards the castle. Harry watched him go with a bemused expression before heading on to Hagrid's hut – Theo following behind somewhat nervously – where he knocked boldly on the door. After a second, the huge man opened the door and looked down at the two Slytherins in surprise.

"Mr. Hagrid!" exclaimed Harry cheerfully. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you. I don't think we've been formally introduced. I'm Harry Potter, Jim's older brother. This is my friend, Theodore Nott. I noticed that one of my other friends, Hermione Granger, was headed this way. Is she still here by any chance?"

"Um, well, ah," Hagrid stammered before Hermione called out. "It's alright, Hagrid, you can let them in." He reluctantly stepped out of the way, and the two boys entered the small hut, which was becoming crowded with two Slytherins, four Gryffindors, a half-giant and what looked like a large boar-hound snoring loudly off in a corner.

Jim, who was sitting at a table with an ice pack held against his forehead, said angrily, "What do you and your snake friend want?"

"Good question. A better one is '*why are you getting medical treatment from the groundskeeper when we have a fully stocked infirmary staffed by a professional mediwitch?*' Then again, forget I asked. I'm sure the answer is ridiculous. Anyway, Little Brother," Jim practically snarled at that, "we're here because Theo and I noticed that you were having problems with your broom, and we were curious as to Hermione's thoughts as to the cause." He looked directly at Hermione and smirked. "I'm practically *burning* with curiosity."

Hermione crossed her arms and huffed at him in annoyance, while Neville pretended to cough to cover up his laugh. It was Ron who answered, though.

"I'm surprised you don't know, snake! It was that greasy git, Snape! He hexed Jim's broom!"

"Here now," said Hagrid, who was busy setting out a pot of tea and looking about for some extra cups. "Tha's jus' nonsense. Snape's a Hogwart's perfessor. Why would he want to harm Jim?"

"Quite right, Hagrid," said Harry cheerfully, as he picked up one of the cups, inspected it briefly, and began to wipe it clean with the hem of his robe. "It's ridiculous to think that Professor Snape would do such a thing."

"Harry," said Hermione regretfully, "I know he's your Head of House, but it's true. I saw him. The whole time Jim's broom was being jinxed, Professor Snape was staring at him without blinking and muttering to himself. You have to

maintain constant concentration to maintain a jinx against the protective wards on a Quidditch broom."

"Oh, I know that full well, Hermione," Harry said amiably as he poured tea for everyone. "After *Daddy* sent that Nimbus 2000 to Jim in the front of the whole school during breakfast last month, I took an avid interest in brooms and especially in how susceptible they might be to jinxes, hexes and curses. Just personal curiosity, you understand." Jim and Ron looked at Harry as if he'd just confessed to plotting murder. Hermione merely rolled her eyes while Neville shook his head.

"Dammit, Harry, you promised!" said Neville reproachfully.

"We agreed no death, dismemberment or permanent injuries, Neville. I was simply investigating whether it was possible to hex a Nimbus so that the rider's clothes would vanish if he ever got near a Snitch."

"You son of a bitch!" exclaimed Jim furiously.

"*Jim!*" exclaimed Harry. "That's our *mother* you're insulting! Anyway, such magic is currently beyond me. For the moment, at least." He smiled evilly at his brother. "The defensive spells on a Nimbus 2000 are state-of-the-art and so strong that only someone skilled in the most obscure of Dark Arts would be able to jinx one at all, let alone in a truly dangerous way."

"Das' very true, Harry," said Hagrid. "Rock cake?" The huge man held a plate of dark brown ... things out to Harry and Theo. Behind him, Hermione and Neville frantically started waving their hands back and forth while mouthing "No!"

"You're very kind, Hagrid," Harry said smoothly, "but dinner will start soon, and Theo and I shouldn't spoil our

appetites." Hagrid looked disappointed but then shrugged and bit into one of the cakes himself with a frightening crunch.

"Be that as it may," continued Hermione, "if anyone at Hogwarts is capable of such Dark Arts, it's probably Professor Snape."

"Yes," said Harry, "unless it's, oh I don't know, the *Defense Against the Dark Arts* instructor, maybe? Who, by the way, was also maintaining unblinking eye contact and muttering the whole time Jim's broom was bucking like a bronco, at least until you knocked him over en route to your little arson attempt."

Hermione sniffed in annoyance. "Honestly, Harry. It was just Bluebell Flames. There was no danger of actually burning Professor Snape. You make me sound like a pyromaniac or something."

Jim interrupted at that point. "Hang on, forget about the blasted Bluebell Flames. You're saying *Quirrell* was the one who tried to kill me?"

"I'm quite certain of it. Hermione, you were distracted by your focus on Professor Snape, but from my vantage point, I could see the whole thing. As soon as you knocked Professor Quirrell over, the interference with Jim's broom stopped immediately." He considered for a moment. "You know, looking back on it, it was very fortunate that the two were seated as they were. It would have been just ... *tragic* if you could have gotten to Snape without passing by Quirrell first. You might have distracted the man casting the counter-jinx, leaving the actual jinx in place, in which case Little Brother here would be a gory splat all over the Quidditch field turf."

Hermione blanched, while Jim raised his chin defiantly. "I'd have survived. There were plenty of wizards who could have caught me if I'd fallen."

"That's a good point, actually," said Neville. "Whether it was Snape or Quirrell, what did he hope to gain by making Jim fall off his broom in front of nearly a thousand witnesses, any number of whom could have easily caught him with a Levitation Charm?"

Harry took a sip of tea and then shook his head. "Oh, I'm sure that wasn't the plan. Professor Quirrell was actually quite clever, but he didn't anticipate someone noticing him and blocking his jinx. I imagine his goal was to take direct control of the broom and then just fly it into the ground at its maximum speed, thereby splattering Jim all over the turf like a sack of overripe tomatoes." The Gryffindors looked varying shades of green at his casual description.

"Everyone would have assumed that Jim had thought he'd seen the Snitch and flown after it too fast, only to lose control. There is a *reason* after all, that the school doesn't *normally* allow First Years to even keep brooms on campus, let alone play on house teams while riding top-of-the-line racing models designed for professional matches. The Boy-Who-Lived would be dead or critically injured in a tragic but perfectly foreseeable Quidditch mishap. So sad. So very, very sad," Harry said in a tone that did not suggest the tiniest bit of sadness. "And then, most likely, the Headmaster would have been blamed for bending the rules to let Jim play at all and probably even be forced out of his position, thereby leaving whatever the Cerberus is guarding more vulnerable."

"How do you know about that?!" exclaimed Ron. Harry gave him an almost pitying look.

"Yeah, how d'yer know 'bout Fluffy?" asked Hagrid in agitation. Behind him, Neville mouthed in astonishment "*Fluffy?!*"

"Purely by second hand knowledge, I assure you," said Harry evenly. "I only bring it up to show that Quirrell is much more dangerous than he appears. And I want you and you," he said pointing at Hermione and Neville, "to stay *away* from him." Then, he looked over at Jim. "You, on the other hand, can go poke him with a stick for all I care."

Jim just made a face at his brother as Hagrid spoke up. "Well, all of ya's stay away from that corridor and from Fluffy. What he's guardin' is no concern o' yers! It's strictly between Perfessor Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel! ... *I shouldn't ha' said tha'!*"

Harry inhaled sharply, closed his eyes and started massaging his temples as Hermione's eyes lit up in excitement. "*Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn!*" he thought. "*She's got a **research project** now! I've got a few months at most before she puzzles out who this Flamel bloke is, and then ...*"

"What, *the* Nicholas Flamel?" piped up a surprised Theo, who had been sitting quietly all this time. "The alchemist? The one who made the Philosopher's Stone?"

"**GAAAAAAH!**"

Parent-Teacher Conference

Chapter Notes

NOTE: The last scene in this chapter was significantly edited on 1/25/2021 to bring Lily's personality and motivations into conformity with Lily as she is in later chapters.

HARRY POTTER AND THE PRINCE OF SLYTHERIN

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CHAPTER 19: The Parent-Teacher Conference

Meanwhile...

From the east window of the Headmaster's Office, Severus Snape watched as Harry stormed out of Hagrid's hut in an uncharacteristic fury, followed soon after by three friends and two enemies. Snape's face had a curious expression as he saw the Granger girl run after Potter – something oddly halfway between a smile and a sneer. Truthfully, he wanted to give the girl points with one hand and take them away with the other. It had taxed his skill with the Dark Arts to their limit to prevent Quirrell from slaying The Other Potter. Then, the girl had solved the problem elegantly (if accidentally) simply by knocking Quirrell over to break his line of sight and then by creating a distraction with her Bluebell Flame Charm. Of course, she had used the Bluebell

Flames against *him*, but luckily, the magical flames generally could not harm living things and merely inflicted some minor scorching to the hem of Snape's robes. The Potions Master assumed that she had mistakenly thought him the cause of The Other Potter's trials instead of being the one trying to save him, but he suspected that The Sensible Potter had already set her to rights on the matter. Or perhaps not – from the looks of his uncharacteristic shouting, something had clearly happened to infuriate the boy.

Snape's ruminations on the First Year children and their activities served to block out the idiotic ravings of The Worst Potter, but a sudden lull in the level of general stupidity behind him caused him to realize he'd been asked a question.

"I beg your pardon, Headmaster. I was lost in thought."

"I asked, Severus, if you had any idea why Professor Quirrell might target Jim Potter under these circumstances? He has made no move against the boy so far. Why now?"

"Frankly, I suspect it is because of the ill-considered decision to let the boy play as Seeker despite his youth and inexperience," said Snape, unwittingly echoing Harry's own theory. "The whole thing has smacked of favoritism and pandering from the start, and if he'd died in his first match, it is likely you would have been blamed for allowing him to play. At a minimum, you would have faced a possible suspension by the Board of Governors. Lucius Malfoy, I'm sure, would happily use the boy's death against you. With you out of Hogwarts, Quirrell would have had a clear shot at the Stone ... which is almost amusing considering the Stone isn't even in position yet."

Dumbledore sighed. "Yes, it has been exasperating. The Mirror of Erised should have been prepared and in place before September 1st, but the difficulties of acquiring it from the Department of Mysteries without attracting undue attention were greater than I anticipated. It will be delivered within the week, and I will spend the month of December attuning it to the castle's wards. We should be ready for Quirrell by the start of second term in January, though I suspect he will wait until later in the year before he makes his move."

"A whole month for attunement, Albus?" said a surprised Lily Potter.

"It is a *very* Dark artifact, Lily. One I would not normally let come within a hundred miles of this school if the need were not so great. As it is, I will have to deactivate several of the school's protective wards designed to detect and block the intrusion of dark artifacts just to allow its entry, and it may take years before those wards become fully functional again. I wish it weren't necessary, but we all know what is at stake here both for Jim and for the wizarding world."

Severus sniffed. At this point in his life, he cared little for the wizarding world, and even less for The Other Potter. He simply wanted to see the last vestige of the Dark Lord destroyed forever. Then, all his old debts repaid, he could finally start searching for some new life for himself. Brazil, perhaps.

"It is gratifying to know that we all have our priorities in order," he said disdainfully. "Jim Potter first, and the rest of the world second. Oh, but, I forget. I suppose Harry Potter comes third once everyone else on the planet has been attended to."

"Why does it not surprise me, Snivellus, to know that you've taken Harry under your wing. No wonder he's gone bad," said James with a sneer. Snape rolled his eyes, but McGonagall was incensed.

"JAMES CHARLUS POTTER! While I respect your status both as auror and Lord of the Wizengamot, I tell you here and now that if I *EVER* hear that vile nickname again I WILL TRANSFIGURE YOU INTO A MOUSE AND *LEAVE YOU FOR MRS. NORRIS TO FIND!*"

Potter swallowed. "Sorry, Professor McGonagall."

"Don't apologize to me! Apologize to the man who, to my shame, I allowed you to bully and harass for seven years! And while you're at it, apologize to your other son, the one whom you assume has 'gone bad' merely for his placement in Slytherin despite the extraordinary heroism he has already shown in coming to the aid of the Longbottom Heir. And need I remind you, it is your *Gryffindor* son who felt the need to use the word 'Mudblood' against a fellow house-mate!"

"Minerva," interrupted Lily, "no one was more embarrassed by that than me, and the same goes for that ridiculous Howler which James and I have ... discussed at length. And we both deeply regret the circumstances under which Harry was raised. But given his Sorting and his relationship to Jim, I agree with James that we have grounds to be concerned about Harry and the possibility of him becoming attracted to ... darker ideologies."

"Then kindly allow me to put those ludicrous concerns to rest, Lady Potter," said Snape contemptuously. "Harry's two best friends are, respectively, a Muggleborn and the third potential candidate identified in the Prophecy. He has

consistently rejected enticements to friendship from the children of Death Eaters with the exception of Theodore Nott, another abused child with whom he has bonded and whose father he unabashedly loathes. His relationship with the Malfoy Heir is one of overt hostility. He is one of the prime movers behind a study group consisting of the top students of every house, yet he is so far the only Slytherin involved. He *immediately* deduced that Quirrell was behind the troll incident and then *immediately* brought his suspicions to me. *Nothing* in his conduct to date evinces antisocial behavior. If Harry Potter *ever* becomes a dark wizard, it is because *you two* have driven him to it with your own actions. In addition to your decade long abandonment of him to abusive Muggles, he is well aware of Lord Potter's continued efforts to disinherit him, and he is completely justified in assuming the worst about your plans for his continued health and survival should he lose the protections afforded by his Heir status."

"Severus, please," said Dumbledore. "We are all upset and concerned by how Harry was treated by the Dursley's. But you make it sound almost as though James is ... plotting Harry's death!"

Snape stared coldly at the Headmaster for several seconds. Then, he drew his wand and summoned a file from his office to Dumbledore's desk. "The boy's medical records. We have no idea of the full extent of his mistreatment, as wizarding children are more resistant to malnutrition than Muggle children and they also heal bruises more quickly. However, the boy was carried to hospital on three separate occasions for serious injuries inflicted by his relatives. *Curiously*," he said sarcastically, "at no point did any of the attending physicians forward the incident reports to the relevant Muggle authorities, despite reporting laws that make it a crime for them to fail so to do. If I were prone to conspiracy

theories, I *might* wonder if someone had spent time Obliviating all the doctors and nurses so that the Muggle authorities would not look too closely into Harry Potter's living arrangements."

"Are you *seriously* suggesting that we *knew* Harry was being physically abused and actively covered it up?" asked James incredulously.

Snape examined his fingernails in apparent boredom. "I'm not suggesting anything at all, Lord Potter, as I've been rather busy here at Hogwarts and have not had opportunity to investigate the matter to my satisfaction. When time permits, I *will* take the opportunity to interview his former teachers as well as any medical personnel who examined the boy after his injuries. And if I *do* find signs of memory tampering, I *will* be contacting Wizarding Child Services." He turned to face the Headmaster with an icy glare. "And I will also be ... reevaluating my association with this school. It has a history of ignoring the criminality of certain favored students that I had hoped was over and done with."

"How dare you...!" James started before Dumbledore sharply interrupted him. The old man looked almost stricken at Snape's insinuations, particularly those about the school which everyone present knew to be true. His own bias towards Gryffindor and against Slytherin had enabled the Marauders' bullying of young Snape for years and ultimately allowed Sirius Black to evade criminal prosecution for what, in retrospect, was likely a deliberate attempt on Snape's life. That leniency nearly led to disastrous results just a few years later when Black turned and betrayed the Potters.

"Severus," he said, "if it will satisfy your concerns, you have leave to spend as much time as you want next summer to

investigate young Harry's upbringing and home life to your satisfaction. As the one who originally identified Harry as a probable squib and also the one who advised the Potters to place him with Muggle relatives, I am willing to accept a great deal of the blame for his suffering. *But* I do not believe you will find that it was intentional on the part of anyone here. Nor do I think you will find anything as sinister as a plot to actively conceal his mistreatment."

"I certainly hope not, Headmaster. But I distrust coincidences, especially when the stakes are so high. Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom are the two alternative candidates who are capable of fulfilling the Prophecy if the Boy-Who-Lived falters. And not only were both of them subjected to abusive behavior by relatives, they were both also mistakenly identified as squibs despite demonstrating considerable magical power that the entire wizarding world somehow missed. Among Longbottom's recovered memories is one indicating he summoned a favorite toy from a distance of over fifty miles, an extraordinary feat. And in Harry Potter's case, his disciplinary file describes an incident suggesting that he once evaded his cousin's gang of bullying hoodlums by Apparating to the top of a building over a half-mile away."

"That's impossible," said James flatly.

"No, just incredibly rare. Fewer than one-percent of wizarding children have verified incidents of either accidental apparation or long-range summoning. And in most of the confirmed cases, the child grows up to be an exceptionally powerful witch or wizard."

"How is the boy doing academically, Severus? I know he's the top student among the Slytherins in Transfiguration," said McGonagall.

"He is easily the top Slytherin student in his year and consistently among the top five among all First Years. The Granger girl dominates every class she's in except for Herbology, where Longbottom arguably has an unfair advantage due to his family history, but no one else consistently outscores Harry in every class. He had a rough start in some classes, of course, primarily due to being Muggle-raised. I'm certain he'd have done better initially had he been given the kind of early preparation that wizarding children take for granted." James stiffened at the implied insult. "I did notice an interesting detail in his academic files. When Harry was in his third year of Muggle primary, he was given an intelligence test that estimated his IQ to be at least 140. The school sent a letter to the Dursleys offering the boy the chance to participate in an accelerated learning program for gifted students. The Dursleys declined ... after keeping the boy out of school for a whole week allegedly due to illness. After he returned, his grades dropped precipitously, and for the remainder of his primary school days, by the end of each year, he consistently finished *exactly* one-half a letter grade below his underachieving cousin Dudley."

McGonagall closed her eyes and hissed. "A highly intelligent boy, abused by his relatives and likely threatened with worse if he ever showed up their slow-witted son academically. It's a miracle he never blew up his home or school with accidental magic."

"Which raises yet another question," said Snape. "My understanding has always been that Harry was placed with his Muggle relatives because he was believed to be a squib. I would like very much to know how that determination was made considering the placement was made at eighteen months when accidental magic is still rare. Even a casual reading of his school records indicates at least two other

incidents suggesting accidental magic besides the one already mentioned, and we have no idea how often it happened at home."

Dumbledore sighed. "I have no answer for that, Severus. Several tests were performed at St. Mungo's immediately after Voldemort's attack that indicated that his magical core was nearly nonexistent. At first, Jim's was just as weak, but it quickly rebounded within days. Harry's did not, or at least, not during the several months he was kept under observation." The old man hesitated. "I must be honest with you. Part of the reason that I thought it wise to separate the two boys was that I was afraid that Jim had somehow drained Harry of his magic through the twin-bond they shared when he repelled Voldemort's attack. Sibling rivalry between a famous, powerful wizard and his squib brother would have been bad enough, but if it turned out that Harry was actually a squib *because* of Jim, I can't imagine what feelings of hatred it would have engendered in him."

"The issue of whether Harry Potter is a squib or not has been decided. He is well on his way to becoming a formidable wizard." Snape turned to Lily and James. "You should move on to the question of whether you want him to be a part of your family again or instead wish to pursue your current and senseless antagonism. I have little optimism on that score, particularly if you insist on leaving him with the Dursleys. Personally, in Harry's place, I would hate you until my dying days for such an insult. But at the very least, stop trying to steal the boy's inheritance."

"No Slytherin has ever held the Potter Seat," said James with a quiet anger. "And no Slytherin ever will."

"Then you were unwise to have abandoned your future heir for ten years to an environment in which only Slytherin

values could have helped him to survive," replied Snape contemptuously.

"We seem stuck in a rut, Albus," said McGonagall. "Is there anything else to discuss? If not, I should like to return to my quarters," she looked over at James with an icy expression, "and brood over my failures as a teacher." Potter's ears turned red at the rebuke.

It turned out that there was nothing left to say, and the other four left Dumbledore alone with his thoughts. Severus Snape had nearly made it to the dungeon when a voice from behind called out to him. It was Lily.

"What can I do for you, Lady Potter?" he said tiredly.

"You can start by calling me Lily, Severus. Whatever our past differences, we are colleagues now and can at least be civil to one another."

Snape sighed. Oddly, he found he couldn't even work up the effort to sneer properly.

"We have not been on civil speaking terms since 1976, *Lily*. I find it interesting that you now seek rapprochement only after your son was caught insulting a Muggleborn in a moment of anger using the same bigoted slur that cost me my first real friendship."

She looked away for a moment and answered quietly. "Yes, alright. Jim lashed out in anger and said the worst, most hateful thing he could think of. Just as you did. And I'm a hypocrite for trying to be understanding of Jim when I washed my hands of you over it. And ... I'm sorry. I know that doesn't mean much now. But now I understand better the pressures you were under as a Slytherin, as well as the

many sacrifices you've made for my family, even if James is too stubborn to see them. I should have forgiven you years ago but didn't because ..." She hesitated.

"Well, I guess because my Gryffindor courage failed. But I'm apologizing now. I'm sorry for cutting you off and ignoring you all those years. And ... I miss my friend."

He stared at her for several seconds. "You'll get over it," he finally said with cold finality. "Now, why are you really here?"

She swallowed. "When you look into Harry's ... situation with Petunia, please let me know what you find. I know you think I'm either a fool or a monster for leaving Harry with her, but I never imagined it would be like that."

"You never imagined ...?! Lily, do you remember when we were eight years old and Petunia called us *freaks* because we could turn dandelions into butterflies? That's what Harry thought his *name* was until he was six – Freak! How could you possibly have thought it acceptable to leave him with that creature?!"

"I thought she'd changed!" Lily exclaimed, her voice breaking. "I didn't just dump him on her doorstep in the night, Severus! After I graduated, I wrote to her and we reconciled! We even corresponded during the whole time we were both pregnant. I personally went to her house and put wards on it after Dudley was born just in case some Death Eater found out she was related to me. When we brought Harry to them, her husband wasn't happy about it and she was obviously still uncomfortable with magic, but she *willingly agreed* to take Harry and promised to let me know if he ever showed magic. I handed him over myself, and she *promised* to look after him as if he were her own!"

She took a few steps closer. Severus resisted the urge to step away from her. "That still doesn't explain why you didn't at least *check up on him!*" he snapped.

She let out a sob before getting hold of herself. "We couldn't, Severus! We didn't dare. After Jim vanquished You-Know-Who, I was certain that it was only a matter of time before Death Eaters came after us for revenge. It was only days later that Frank and Alice Longbottom were ... well, you know what happened to them. I was afraid that if Harry grew up in the wizarding world with no magic of his own, it was inevitable that dark wizards or blood purists would go after him, whether to use him as a way to hurt Jim or blackmail us or simply because they were offended that a Squib had been born to '*the illustrious House of Potter!*' It was already bad enough how many people looked down on us because *blood traitor James Potter* went off and married a filthy Mudblood!"

Her voice hitched with emotion as she struggled to continue. "I lost my parents to the Death Eaters, Sev! You know how horrible their deaths were! The things those animals did to them before *burning them alive!* Just as you know how cruel the Death Eaters could be to Squibs who fell into their hands. I couldn't bear to lose a son that way!"

Snape was silent as Lily paused to regain control of herself. Finally, she continued.

"And all that was *before* Albus theorized that when Jim could only vanquish You-Know-Who by draining magic from Harry and possibly his very life force. Harry simply wasn't *safe* with us, and if giving him up would provide that safety, I was willing to do just that. No matter how much it hurt to surrender him."

Snape studied her, using the passive aspects of his Legilimency to determine if she was being truthful.

"You still have not answered my question, Lily. Why did you never check up on him?"

She wiped a tear away and took a deep breath. "Two reasons. First, Petunia insisted on it. She hated magic, but Vernon was terrified by it, and she thought that having wizards come to visit would upset him and threaten their marriage. And reluctantly, i agreed. in fact ..."

She looked down at the floor. "Please don't tell James this, but ... I encouraged Petunia to tell Harry that we'd died in an accident. I thought it would help him accept the Dursleys as his real family and forget about his birth-parents." Then, her face hardened. "*Obviously*, the embellishment that James was a drug dealer and I was a prostitute and we killed ourselves in drunk driving accident that James caused was *not* part of the plan!"

"And the other reason?" Snape asked.

"I was afraid if I saw Harry, my nerve would break, I would snatch him away and bring him back into our world and ... and then ... *I'd get him killed!*"

Lily looked deeply into Severus's eyes with a pleading expression.

"Severus, find out what happened. Find out what made her act so cruelly towards my son. Find out how my sister and her whole family turned into *monsters!*"

"Believe me, Lily. I intend to. But one final question: You have explained why you did not visit Harry while he was with the Muggles. But for Merlin's sake! Why haven't you

reached out to him since he got his letter! You let James go to meet him *alone* while you made a flimsy excuse to avoid him. Why?"

She sniffed and rubbed another tear away, as her face assumed a look of broken resignation.

"Because I knew he would hate us. Even before I found out about the abuse, I knew he would hate us for leaving him with another family while we focused on raising his twin brother instead. I loved my mother and father, Sev. But if they'd ever done to me what we unwittingly did to Harry, even for the best of reasons, I would have despised them for it and never forgiven them. You know what I'm like, Severus, and what Petunia's like. Our mother was just the same way about people who'd wronged her. A Potter can have moments of terrible unthinking rage, as my dear husband proved with that stupid Howler. But an *Evans*? We know how to carry a *grudge*! And from the way he spoke to us when he delivered that restraining order-another reason to stay away since it's obviously what he wants-I know Harry can carry an Evans grudge too!"

Snape sighed. "Very will. Anything I discover which I share with the Headmaster I will also share with you."

She nodded. After a hesitation, he spoke once more.

"Answer me one final question, though, Lily. If you had to choose, right now, between Harry and Jim, knowing how one has been cruelly mistreated and the other spoiled almost to the point of ruin, what choice would you make today? Who would you choose to keep?"

The color drained from her face, and when she spoke, it was with complete resignation.

"There is no choice, Severus, and you know it. Jim is the Boy-Who-Lived, the Child of Prophecy. And if he fails, then the whole world will fall to the Dark Lord, *including Harry*. I would have died myself to spare my sons from what happened that night, but that wasn't an option I was given. So yes, right now, I have to be Jim's mother first and foremost, because if Jim fails, I'll probably lose them both. We both know I haven't had any real choices to make where either of my sons were concerned since 1981."

He looked at her and chuckled darkly. "No, I suppose not. Although I must say, Lily, I can see one positive benefit arising from how Harry Potter has been treated for the last decade."

"Oh?" she said almost hopefully.

"Yes. It has been twenty years since you and I were sorted into different houses. And at long last, I can finally and truthfully say ... I'm over you."

And with that, he turned and walked away.

This was originally only part of a 6000 word chapter which I decided was a bit too cumbersome. The second half (which, naturally, will be called "Student-Teacher Conference") will be a special update to be posted on Wednesday, June 10, 2015 between 4 and 6 pm. It features the aftermath of Harry's "GAAAAAAH!" In other news, I finally noticed the button for making horizontal lines!

AN! This chapter was updated on 1/25/2021 to better reflect development of Lily's personality and rationale for how she's treated Harry.

Student-Teacher Conference

CHAPTER 20: The Student-Teacher Conference

Minutes later...

To his mild surprise, Snape found Harry sitting in his usual chair in the Potions lab, softly banging his head against his desk. He sighed. "Mr. Potter. I don't believe that you have any detentions assigned to me, so I assume you have some information to share which you think is too vital to wait until Monday. Out with it."

The boy stopped banging his head but didn't lift it up from the desk. "Beneath the trap door guarded by Fluffy the Cerberus lay a series of rooms, each with a trap designed by one of the Hogwarts professors. Specifically and in order, by Sprout, Flitwick, McGonagall, Quirrell, and yourself. And in the last room is Nicholas Flamel's fabled Philosopher's Stone which Professor Quirrell wants to steal." He finally raised his head and looked dully at Snape. "And *The Git-Who-Lived* knows all about it."

Snape shook his head in resignation and sat down at his desk. "How?"

"Hagrid. A few details from Theo that only hastened the inevitable, but mainly Hagrid. He. Just. Would. Not. Shut. Up! I'm surprised he's not up in the Astronomy Tower right now with a megaphone, blaring out the secret of how to get past the Cerberus!"

Snape leaned forward. "Did he ...?"

"No, but only because I made a big scene and stormed out in such a way that everyone followed me. I'm sure Jim and Ron will go back and get it out of him later. Mind you, I don't even see how getting past Fluffy is any big deal to begin with."

The Potions Master raised an eyebrow. "Indeed. So have *you* figured out the secret for neutralizing the Cerberus?"

"No, but unlike some people I could name, I'm not a powerful homicidal wizard who has infiltrated Hogwarts in order to steal the Philosopher's Stone. If I were, I'm pretty sure I would just use the Killing Curse on Fluffy and then get on with it."

"Ah, the direct approach. Unfortunately for us, Potter, the enemy is more knowledgeable than you. Hogwarts' wards would instantly detect a Killing Curse cast within the castle and alert not only every faculty member to the location where it was used, but also the DMLE. The beast is highly magic resistant, and no spell less potent than the Killing Curse would easily kill it. There is only one way to overcome the hellhound and reach the trapdoor without sounding the alarm and only Hagrid and the Headmaster know what it is."

"Have you considered Obliviating Hagrid?"

"One point deducted for your cheek, Potter. Do not mock the Hogwarts staff, not even Hagrid. We all have our roles to play."

"Well, I'm sorry, sir, but I'm a bit upset, as I have friends who I now feel are in genuine danger. I was willing to ignore the troll as a simple diversion that got out of hand, but Quirrell has just demonstrated his willingness to

murder a student in front of several thousand witnesses. Granted, it was *Jim Potter*, but he's still a Hogwarts student. And while I may not care about the Git's fate, two of my best friends are caught up in his orbit and are potential victims if they get drawn into his ... *adventures*," Harry's voice dripped with contempt on the last word.

"You are not responsible for the fate of those who will not listen to your reasoned advice, Potter. If it is any comfort, that was a hard lesson for me to learn as well. Encourage your friends to avoid Quirrell and to resist being drawn into the Other Potter's foolishness. That is all you can reasonably hope to achieve."

"Sir, I might be more confident about this whole situation if I could see any sense to it. Why even hide the Stone in a school in the first place? I'm *eleven* and I can think of better protections for the Philosopher's Stone sticking in Hogwarts behind a gauntlet of traps."

"Really, Potter?" sneered the Potions Master. "You actually think yourself more clever and intelligent than the entire Hogwarts faculty put together? Such hubris is unbecoming of you."

The boy grimaced and shook his head. "I don't think anything of the sort, Professor Snape. But I have read the reports about the defeat of You-Know-Who and the role Sirius Black played in it. Consequently, I am *also* aware of a little thing called the Fidelius Charm which provides *absolute protection* so long as you aren't stupid enough to share the secret of what you're hiding with your enemy. If Nicholas Flamel had really wanted the Stone protected, he'd have hidden it at the bottom of his sock drawer, cast the Fidelius with his wife as Secret Keeper, and let that be the end of it."

Snape did not respond. The silence in the room barely lasted barely three seconds, but it seemed like an eternity before the boy finally spoke again.

"Which is, *of course*, exactly what he *did*!" Harry said with rising annoyance. "The *true* Stone is hidden away under a Fidelius while the Headmaster makes a grand show of constructing elaborate traps around a convincing fake. He even announces what room it's in at the Opening Feast while standing ten feet away from Quirrell, since exposing Quirrell is actually the entire point of this whole exercise!" Harry exhaled in visible anger. "Professor Snape, who *is* this man? The upper year students remember Quirrell as a likeable and well-spoken Muggle Studies professor and certainly not a stammering cold-blooded killer. Is it some imposter impersonating Quirrell or has he... been ..."

The boy trailed off, his eyes slowly widening. The Potions Master had let Harry talk out of curiosity as to how much he could deduce on his own. Snape had submitted to Dumbledore's orders that he not warn his Slytherins of the true nature of the threat stalking the halls of Hogwarts, but nothing in his vow prevented him from subtly confirming or denying the hypotheses of his more intelligent students. After nearly ten seconds, however, he became mildly concerned at the boy's seeming paralysis and so exercised a power he rarely used, despite what the more paranoid Hogwarts parents might believe: Legilimency. The results were unexpected, as Snape had never before encountered someone who outwardly wore a masque of calm tranquility while screaming hysterically on the inside.

"OH GOD! IT'S VOLDEMORT! VOLDEMORT'S NOT DEAD! VOLDEMORT'S POSSESSING THE DADA INSTRUCTOR! THAT'S WHY HIS PERSONALITY HAS

CHANGED! VOLDEMORT IS TRYING TO STEAL THE STONE TO GET A NEW BODY AND HAS POSSESSED QUIRRELL TO GET IT! THAT'S WHY JIM AND I HURT WHEN QUIRRELL TURNS AROUND - BECAUSE VOLDEMORT IS PROBABLY STARING AT US OUT OF THE BACK OF QUIRRELL'S HEAD LIKE AN EVIL PUSTULE OF DOOM AND QUIRRELL WEARS A TURBAN TO HIDE HIS DOOM PIMPLE AND HE TRIED TO KILL JIM OUT OF REVENGE FOR 1981 AND HE'LL TRY TO KILL ME BECAUSE I ALREADY PROVED I CAN TAKE DOWN A TROLL AND ALSO JIM AND I LOOK ALIKE AND VOLDEMORT'S AN EVIL INSANE MORON WHO WON'T BE ABLE TO TELL US APART AND ...!"

"POTTER!" barked Snape. "Get a hold of yourself!"

Harry abruptly shook his head and blinked several times, as Snape rose and moved to where the boy sat. The Professor reached into his voluminous robes and pulled out a potion, which he handed to Harry. "Drink this. It's a Calming Draught."

Harry took the potion cautiously and looked up at his professor. "I wasn't aware I needed calming, sir," he said shakily.

"Indeed, Potter. I've never before seen someone demonstrate such external composure while having an internal panic attack. Drink."

Harry pulled the stopper and downed the potion in one gulp. Then, he frowned as he considered the implications of what Snape had just said. "You can read my thoughts," he said. It was neither a question nor an accusation, merely an observation.

"Yes," Snape said after some hesitation, "when necessary. It is an obscure and difficult skill known as Legilimency. I would reassure you that I only rarely use it on students, though since you have no means of detecting it or even defending against it save through completely avoiding eye contact, you would be foolish and naive to believe me."

"Right. And who else can do this ... Legilimency?"

"I really couldn't say."

Harry looked Snape *directly* in the eye and *thought* as clearly as he could. "*Because you don't know? Or because you're under an oath not to reveal?*"

Snape's mouth twisted into something that was almost but not quite a smile. "Both," he said aloud. "I can say that, as far as I know, Professor Quirrell lacks this ability, *but* if he should turn his back to you, it might be wise to avoid looking directly at the back of his head. Or, indeed, in his general direction."

"Oookay. Is there any better defense to Legilimency than that?"

Snape regarded the boy for a moment. Then, without another word, he turned and left through the door to his office, returning a moment latter with a small leather bound book which he handed to Harry. The boy crooked an eyebrow as he regarded the cover.

"***Great Potion Masters of the Holy Roman Empire?***" he read in confusion.

Snape gave him a '*don't be stupid*' look. "The cover is transfigured, Potter, as it is not something you should be seen reading by the casual observer. Though not illegal, the

mystic art known as Occlumency is frowned upon by most authority figures since a Master Occlumens can potentially overcome the effects of Veritaserum and other magical techniques for discerning the truth in a court of law."

Harry nodded and opened the book. The title page read **Occlumency: The Moste Hidden Arte**.

"Occlumency. And that will help me to shield my thoughts against Professor Quirrell?"

"No," Snape said bluntly. "It is fantastically unlikely that you will be able to develop even the most rudimentary Occlumency shields before the Quirrell situation resolves itself one way or another. Consider this more of a long term self-enrichment project. While the text will be immediately useful in improving memory and defending against some more obvious psychic attacks, it will likely take you a minimum of two to three years of consistent study and practice before you can reliably defend yourself against any competent Legilimens."

"Two ... to three ... years. Great. No shortcuts at all?"

Snape looked thoughtful. "There is one rather ... extreme alternative approach." Then, he shrugged. "Sometimes, it even works."

"Sometimes?"

"Yes. Approximately one out of every twelve or so wizards is able to spontaneously develop a form of natural Occlumency often in as little as a month or two in response to regular exposure to high level Legilimency attacks. That is actually how I was first introduced to the discipline as I am one of those rare individuals."

Harry nodded. "And the other eleven or so?"

"They waste their time writhing around on the floor clutching their heads in agony while simultaneously being forced to relive their most painful and humiliating memories."

The boy blinked a few times. "I'll try the book first."

"A wise decision. And remember, what you have deduced cannot be shared with others, lest the enemy have a greater pool of unprotected minds from which he can learn of our plans for him. Do not speak of it. To the extent possible, do not even think upon it."

Harry nodded solemnly. He knew what was at stake now. *"Voldemort is alive – well, for some definitions of 'alive.' Voldemort is possessing a Hogwarts professor. Voldemort is after the Philosopher's Stone. And Dumbledore and most of the staff **know** about it and have a **plan** for dealing with him, hopefully for good. So all I have to do is keep a bunch of hyperactive Gryff's from interfering and cocking things up. No problem."* Harry resisted the impulse to start banging his head on his desk again in despair.

Later that night, Harry was alone in the common room reviewing the book Snape had given him. When asked, he told the other Slytherins that it was an extra credit assignment for Binns because he was worried about his inability to stay awake in the ghost's History class. Having made his way through the first six chapters, Harry decided to call it a night and put the book away when he noticed something unusual in his book bag: a folded and wax-sealed piece of parchment he had never seen before but which had his name printed on the outside. The lettering was in a plain generic script and appeared to have been engraved through magic rather than handwritten. He cast the few diagnostic spells he knew on it, and all of them came up

negative. Which, of course, merely meant that if the paper was cursed, it had been done by someone higher than a First Year. Harry exhaled. Paranoia had been getting to him, but there were obviously easier ways to hex him than via a mysterious letter stuffed into his book bag.

With a shrug, he sliced through the wax seal with his wand and opened the letter. On the inside were six words in the same bland script followed by a question mark, words that meant nothing to him but definitely piqued his curiosity. And immediately after Harry read the question, the paper disintegrated in flash of green fire, without even leaving any ash or residue behind. Just a six-word question now stuck in Harry's mind:

"Who Is The Prince of Slytherin?"

The Christmas Feast

CHAPTER 21: Christmas Dinner

25 December 1991

Surprisingly, it had been a quiet seven weeks since the infamous Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match. Quirrell had made no more murder attempts on Jim or anyone else. The Gryffindors had taken no further action to investigate the Third Floor corridor or to "protect" the Philosopher's Stone from Quirrell ... or from Snape, as the Git and the Weasel were convinced that he was the true villain and it had been Quirrell who saved Jim from falling. Harry chose to let them believe that in the hopes that they'd do something stupid in Snape's class and get enough detentions to keep them out of trouble. Today, on Christmas morning, he thought back over recent events as he got dressed.

True to his word, Blaise had joined the study group, and he had been remarkably polite to those of less than immaculate blood purity. More than polite, in fact. He'd been almost flirtatious with all of the female members, including Hermione, a fact which troubled both Harry and Neville for reasons neither of them could articulate. Initially, Blaise had been a bit cagey around Harry after the latter had guessed correctly about his interest in Muggle culture, but soon, he made something of a game of letting Harry guess just how integrated into Muggle society he actually was. In addition to casual familiarity with *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, he'd also let slip a few *Simpsons* references and even looked sadly sympathetic when Hermione bemoaned the cancellation of *Doctor Who*. They were also both fans of something

called *Press Gang*. Harry himself was vaguely aware of the latter two shows and had actually seen several episodes of *The Simpsons* on occasions when the Dursleys left him with Mrs. Figg while they were on holiday. Only a few, though, as the older lady preferred American Westerns for some odd reason. Ironically, Harry had never actually seen *Bill & Ted* at all, but he'd *heard* it a dozen times, as it was one of Dudley's favorite videos and the television was next to his cupboard.

One big hint about Zabini came when Harry learned that the boy would be spending the Christmas holidays at his mother's mansion in Manhattan. A wealthy woman, Madame Zabini (*Countess* Zabini, to be precise, though Blaise claimed he didn't like "to brag") had a dozen homes around the world, but she preferred to celebrate the holidays in New York, due to a fondness for the city's legendary Times Square New Year's festivities. Blaise mentioned that Manhattan did not have a concentrated magical community comparable to Diagon Alley, and so the wizards of New York took things like subways and cable television for granted. He also joked that he sometimes felt like the wizarding equivalent of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, a reference that was completely lost on Harry as it was not the sort of show the Dursleys would ever watch.

Theo had also joined the study session, Harry was pleased to see, although he remained shy and quiet. Neville made a point of taking Nott under his wing and giving the boy encouragement, especially when Harry wasn't around to do so. As far as Neville was concerned, Theo, by showing him how to unlock his suppressed memories, had helped save Longbottom's life just as much as Harry and Hermione, and he was determined to do what he could to repay the favor. After a few weeks, Theo's class performance had improved noticeably, though he had to put up with snide comments

from some of the older Purebloods suggesting that Harry was leading him to consort with "undesirables." The first time he successfully performed a Transfiguration before Draco Malfoy made it all worthwhile, however.

When not preparing for end of term exams, Harry had divided his time between his ongoing legal dramas with the Potters and searching the school for any references to the elusive Prince of Slytherin. Both matters seemed to be at an impasse. For the moment, James Potter had no authority to disinherit him, but he would certainly keep looking. Harry, for his part, was looking into backup plans in case his birth-father ever succeeded, but according to the law, it would require hiring Gringotts to perform a few blood tests. Since Harry had no intention of sending samples of his blood via owl post, that meant he would have to wait for the summer.

Furthermore and to Harry's consternation, *none* of the snakes of Hogwarts would answer any questions about the Prince of Slytherin. They all knew *exactly* what the term meant but were either unwilling or unable to answer Harry's questions about it. The best he could get was advice to *not* ask fellow students or any faculty members, as both would be at best a waste of time and at worst a possible invitation to assassination. The bluntness with which some of the snakes talked about the danger inherent in the information was startling. The only practical piece of advice Harry got was from Egbert, who, after days of prodding, finally advised Harry to seek "the Sentinel" who could be found "past the nests where the lesser powers dwelt" which meant absolutely nothing to Harry.

In early December, Snape passed around a sign-up sheet for those who would be staying at Hogwarts over the Christmas holidays. In Slytherin House, that consisted solely of Harry and Theo. Draco made an insulting remark

over Harry not having a family that wanted him for Christmas. Harry just smiled and rubbed his fingers, as if they were itching to hold a wand, and the boy paled and walked away.

For two days now, Harry and Theo had the entire Slytherin dorms to themselves, which actually surprised Harry a bit. He'd assumed that more of the Slytherins would seize the opportunity to avoid their families over Christmas break, but apparently most Slytherin households were not as ... difficult as House Nott. Harry, of course, had no desire to return to the Dursleys, but he was somewhat annoyed to learn that Jim and Lily would remain at the castle over the break and that James would be joining them for the Christmas Feast. He wondered if he could get special permission to eat in the kitchens with the house elves.

The various Weasleys also stayed over Christmas break. Ronald avoided him like the plague, apparently afraid he would get Slytherin cooties or something, but Harry had several amiable conversations with the Twins as well as a thoroughly enjoyable snowball fight in which Theo also took part. Unfortunately, it ended prematurely when Quirrell walked by and the Twins tried to knock his turban off his head. Harry made an excuse to break things off in case the two succeeded and provoked some lethal reprisal. He also had several interesting conversations with Percy Weasley. Well, not *interesting* as such – several of them were, in fact, excruciatingly dull. The older Weasley was happy to discuss such topics as the system for selecting prefects, what job opportunities there were post-graduation, and after he'd opened up a bit, his opinions on the six Slytherin prefects. Harry had also dropped a few hints warning Percy about Ron's association with Jim and about how they'd both displayed far too much interest in the Third Floor corridor.

Harry didn't know if it would help, but it couldn't hurt to have another pair of eyes watching the two.

Harry's Christmas morning started off on an upbeat note, as he had received gifts from Neville, Hermione and several members of the study group. Oh, and a gift-wrapped toilet set from the Twins. The most interesting gift, however, was a nicely wrapped box with no card containing a VHS copy of *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. Inside, however, was a blank tape. Harry wondered for a bit where he could possibly play it at Hogwarts. Then, on impulse, he cast a Finite Incantatem on the tape, and it transfigured itself into the form of a small book bearing the title **Pathways of the Mind**. Inside was a handwritten note that simply read "*You may find these exercises more helpful than those in your regular Occlumency reading. Also, Mom wants to meet you sometime.*" It was, of course, unsigned. Laughing at how easily Blaise simultaneously combined obfuscation with theatricality, Harry transfigured the book back into a VHS tape and put it away. From the Dursleys, he received a one-pound note. He didn't get anything at all from the Potters. Theo received mountains of candy from his brother Alex, from Neville, and of course from Harry, but nothing from his father, for which he actually seemed somewhat relieved.

Around lunchtime, Theo and Harry made their way down to the Great Hall for the Christmas Feast. The Hall was filled with dozens of trees all wondrously decorated. The normal four House tables were gone, as was the raised dais and the faculty table that normally sat upon it. Instead, there was one long table in the center of the room, filled to the creaking with food. By tradition, everyone who remained in the castle at Christmas ate together. The two Slytherins made their way down to the far end of the table and took their seats next to a few upper-year Ravenclaws who they didn't know, but introductions were quickly made. The four

Weasley brothers, Lily and Jim sat at the opposite end, although the Twins and Percy all waved to Harry as he sat. Those faculty members who remained at the castle sat in the middle.

Just as the Feast was starting, James Potter entered, kissed his wife, presented the Gift with a big box in gold foil and sat down, all without ever looking even once in Harry's direction, a feat which actually required obvious and deliberate effort on his part. Harry just shook his head in amusement. A few minutes later, the doors burst open again, and, to Harry's pleasant surprise, Neville came in, accompanied by his grandmother. And still in her stuffed vulture hat! The two stopped off to wish Dumbledore and the other faculty members a Merry Christmas and then made their way to the far end where Harry and Theo sat. Neville gave the two a big hug and then introduced them to the deeply intimidating Augusta Longbottom. She explained that in light of "recent events," she had thought it diplomatic to dispense with the usual Longbottom Family Christmas they customarily shared with Algie's children and grandchildren. Both Harry and Theo bowed respectfully and kissed the woman's knuckles in the traditional manner. She registered her approval and then eyed Theo somewhat severely.

"You are the son of Tiberius Nott, I take it?" she said imperiously.

He swallowed deeply. "I am his younger son, yes, ma'am."

"I must confess, Master Nott, that I do not approve of your father."

He grimaced but did not lower his gaze. "If you will forgive the impertinence, ma'am, I don't much approve of him

either."

The old woman fixed him with a gimlet eye ... and then she smiled. "My grandson informs me that the House of Longbottom owes you a debt. I wish you to understand that this debt is owed to *you* and not to the House of Nott. Furthermore, should circumstances ever warrant it, the House of Longbottom offers you sanctuary." She turned to include Harry. "That offer extends to you as well, Harry Potter."

The two boys bowed respectfully and offered their thanks. Privately, Harry hoped that things wouldn't degenerate to the point that he'd need sanctuary with the Longbottoms, but who knew what the future held. Anyway, it was good to know that Theo had a safe house if necessary. Harry also noticed that, at the far end of the table, James was finally unable to ignore them any longer, and he was visibly upset to see Madame Longbottom and her grandson merrily eating Christmas dinner with two Slytherins while ignoring the Potters completely.

At the end of the feast, the Longbottoms said their goodbyes – they were heading to St. Mungo's to visit Neville's parents as was their Christmas tradition – and made for the door. Harry was surprised to see James and Lily following after her, dragging an annoyed Jim behind them. He was half tempted to follow, but he assumed Neville would owl him later with a rundown if anything interesting was said. He did notice that Professor McGonnagal was staring after them with a fairly venomous look in her eye. In the foyer of the Great Hall, the Potters caught up with Madame Longbottom and her grandson.

"Madame Longbottom! Sorry, I just didn't want you and your grandson to leave without wishing you a Happy

Christmas!" said James jovially. "I don't know that we've ever been formally introduced. I'm James Potter and this is my wife Lily. And of course, this is our son, Jim Potter. Lily and I were great friends with Frank and Alice."

"Really? I wasn't aware, Lord Potter. I do recall that Frank had mentioned you in passing during his school days, though you were a few years behind him. And my recollection was that Alice was to be the godmother of your twins while Lady Potter was to be the godmother of little Neville. But then, I never heard from either of you after Frank and Alice were injured. And, of course, when you felt the need to send your young heir away, you never inquired as to whether he might be welcome in the House of Longbottom rather than being sent off to live with Muggles. So, *naturally*, I assumed that I must have been mistaken on the matter."

James coughed and adjusted his collar which suddenly seemed too tight, while Lily looked stricken. "Madame Longbottom," James said. "I apologize for any offense we have given you through our failure to maintain contact. As for Harry, we made what we thought was the best decision at the time. Regarding Neville, it is true that we should have been more proactive with Lily's role as godmother, but no paperwork had ever been filed making her role official, and we felt it inappropriate to intrude after the Wizengamot had already made its decision about regency and guardianship. That said, we would like to make it up to the House of Longbottom now and hopefully construct a new alliance with you. We're hosting a New Year's Eve party next week, and we would be honored if you and Neville could attend. Several of Neville's schoolmates will be there."

"Is Harry coming?" asked Neville mildly.

James's eye twitched. Jim actually snorted and started to say something when Lily dug her fingernails so hard into his shoulder that he nearly hissed in pain. "Harry has ... decided to stay at the castle for the entire holidays rather than coming home," she said. Neville's expression darkened a bit at that. He knew that Potter Manor had never even been offered as an option for Harry. It was Hogwarts or the Dursleys.

"Oh, that is a pity," said Augusta. "In any case, I believe that Neville and I have other plans for New Year's. Perhaps another time."

"I hope so." James took Augusta's hand (which she proffered rather stiffly) and kissed it, before turning to leave.

"Oh, Lord Potter?" He turned back to the old woman who stepped in very close to him, as if to whisper a secret for his ears only. "My son Frank... never liked you," she said quietly and dangerously. "He thought you were spoiled and arrogant, and he was incensed that neither McGonagall nor Dumbledore would do anything to rein in you and that gang of bullying thugs with whom you surrounded yourself. Alice practically had to drag him to your wedding, and Alice herself was utterly baffled as to why her sensible and intelligent friend would ever agree to marry you in the first place. I just thought you should know all that before you embarrass yourself further by asserting a close friendship with people who can no longer speak for themselves."

And with that, Augusta Longbottom turned and led a beaming Neville away from a humiliated James Potter and his family. Once they were through the doors, Neville spoke. "Have I mentioned lately how awesome you are, Gran?"

"Tosh, Neville. I've gotten entirely too soft in my old age. Twenty years ago, I'd have hexed his bits off."

The Mirror of Erised

CHAPTER 22: The Mirror of Erised

26 December 1991

"*Harry!*" whispered Theo urgently. Harry grunted and rolled over to see his friend standing next to his bed, though why he was whispering in an otherwise empty room was a mystery.

"What is it, Theo?" asked Harry grumpily, still half-asleep. "And what time is it?"

"Never mind that now," the other boy said at a more normal volume. "I found something... something strange. And ... I really need you to take a look at it and tell me what it means. Please?"

Harry felt around in this dark for his glasses and wand and then cast a Lumos and Tempus. "Theo! It's nearly 3 o'clock in the morning!" he said irritably. "What could you want me to see that can't at least wait until dawn?"

"It can't wait, Harry. Please, just come with me." It was at that point by the dim light of the Lumos spell that Harry realized his friend had been crying.

"Theo, what's happened? Tell me what's going on?" he asked, suddenly alert and wary.

"I can't just explain it – you wouldn't believe me. That's why I want you to come see for yourself. It's ... I think it's *possible* that I've gone crazy, so I want someone ... sensible ... someone I trust to back me up and tell me if

what I found is real or not." Theo could see Harry's hesitation in the gloom. "Harry, in all the time we've been friends, I've never asked you for anything. But I'm asking you now, please come with me."

Harry studied his friend. It was true that Theo, shy as he was, had never made any demands on Harry's friendship. Not even after the loan of his Notice-Me-Not ring to aid in rescuing Neville at Halloween. At the time, Harry had not fully appreciated how precious a gift that was. The ring was a Nott family heirloom. It was *supposed* to be with Theo's brother Alexander at Durmstrang, but Alex was intensely if discretely protective of his younger brother and secretly gave him the ring, a Rememberall and several other magical items which Tiberius Nott had intended for his Heir Presumptive. The elder Nott would be furious to know that Theo had the ring at all, and Harry shuddered at the thought of his reaction if he ever learned that Theo had given it to a Potter in order to help rescue a Longbottom.

"Do I at least have time to get dressed?" he asked wearily. Apparently not, as seconds later, the two exited the dungeon in pajamas, robes and slippers, though Harry insisted on donning his wand holster. Five minutes later, Theo led Harry into an empty dust-covered classroom in an unused wing of the school. In the middle of the room was a large and rather ornate free-standing mirror, standing about four-feet wide and twice as tall. Theo pointed at it excitedly and started in that direction, but Harry quickly grabbed him by the shoulder. "No. I've followed you here after curfew, but I'm not going near that thing until you tell me what's going on. How did you even find this room?"

Theo looked embarrassed. "Well, I was feeling a bit hungry during the night - you know I have trouble sleeping - so I sneaked over to the kitchens for a snack. One of the upper

years who's friends with Alex told me how to find it and how to get in. On my way back, Mrs. Norris saw me, and I thought Filch might catch me, so I ran. I got turned around, and when I thought I heard them behind me, I ducked in here. That's when I found her."

"Her?"

Theo nodded excitedly and pulled free of Harry's grasp. He ran across the room to stand in front of the mirror with a rapturous expression on his face. Cautiously, Harry followed him more slowly into the gloomy, dust-covered room. About halfway across the room, he jumped at the sound of the door creaking behind him. He'd forgotten that he'd left it open partially. Slowly, he turned back towards Theo and moved to join his friend, waving away the dust and cobwebs while mentally steeling himself for whatever image the mirror showed.

"Isn't she beautiful," Theo said softly. And she was, with her brilliant red hair and dazzling green eyes only a shade darker than Harry's own. His only question was why Theo was so entranced by Lily Potter. Well, that and why Theo was ignoring the other three figures in the mirror – James Potter, Jim Potter, and Harry himself. But then Harry had never seen a reflection of himself like this one: healthy, happy and thrilled to be in the company of the other Potters. He still wore Slytherin robes, just as Jim wore the colors of Gryffindor, but there was no hint of animosity over it on the part of either twin. The brothers each had an arm over the other's shoulder as if they were the best of friends. James, in his auror's robes, affectionately rubbed his fingers through Harry's hair, mussing the perfect Sleekeasy hairstyle, but Harry only laughed as if used to it. And Lily looked back and forth at her three boys (for James's easy laugh made him look like an overgrown boy playing dress-

up as an auror) in the very picture of maternal love. Theo was right – she was beautiful.

"This is what it should have been. This is the life we all should have had," Harry thought in wonderment.

Then, Theo spoke again, almost dreamily. "So beautiful. Why did she have to die, Harry?"

Theo's words sliced through the train of Harry's thoughts like a jagged knife, and out of sheer reflex, Harry initiated the basic self-diagnostic techniques that had comprised the first lesson of his introductory Occlumency training. *"Wait, what? Lily's still alive. So what is Theo talking about? Some other woman? Of course. He sees someone else in the mirror, someone he loves as much as I love my family. So we see different things. I see that my family loves me, and he sees that someone he loves who died. But ... that means that what he's seeing isn't real. And if he is seeing something impossible then ... what I see ... is impossible too. They look like they love me. Impossible. They look like they accept me. Impossible. I look like I love them. Impossible. It's all a lie. Nothing but IMPOSSIBLE LIES!"*

With a low guttural cry like a wounded animal, Harry turned his face from the mirror and staggered a few steps away, dropping to his hands and knees as he fought the urge to vomit. And it *hurt!* It had been physically painful to rip himself out of the comforting fantasy that beckoned within the mirror. Even now that he knew it was a deception, he *still wanted* to go back and look at it again. From somewhere behind him, he thought he heard a movement and in a flash, his wand was out panning the room. But there was nothing there – just his imagination playing tricks, the pounding of his heart making him jumpy.

As he retracted his wand, he suddenly noticed that his hands were shaking, and from his side vantage point, he dared another look at the mirror. It seemed safe now. Well, safe to him – Theo had also fallen to his knees and was staring in awe at the image it held, tears streaming down his face even as he grinned in delight. Apparently, its powers only affected those who looked directly into it. Harry marveled at what sort of stupidity would lead to something as monstrous as this being placed in a school. Then, he remembered what *else* had been placed in the school and understood. This was a *trap*, one meant for *Voldemort himself*. And some fool had left it in an unlocked room over the Christmas break. Harry shook his head. Then, he thought back to what he'd felt when he looked into the mirror and let out a shuddering breath. He had nearly been ensnared by a trap intended for Voldemort. Would it have driven him mad? Sucked out his soul? Or merely left him inert and helpless until someone else came along? Almost certainly, he would never have broken free on his own if he hadn't begun a study of Occlumency, and even then, he'd needed Theo to say something to trigger his primitive defenses. He thanked whatever gods wizards were supposed to worship that Theo himself had broken free long enough to come to him instead of staying here alone all night.

Harry rose and edged around slowly, avoiding a direct reflection. At the top of the mirror, he noticed, was some lettering. It was an archaic script but clearly English letters, though it didn't look like the English language (or indeed, any language Harry had ever encountered). "ERISED STRA EHRU OYT UBE CAFRU OYT ON WOHSI," it said. Harry studied the words for a moment and then rolled his eyes. "*Wizards*," he thought contemptuously. He hoped Voldemort didn't take the time to read the instruction manual someone had helpfully placed atop the

mirror before looking within, or Dumbledore's little game would be all for nothing.

"So, the mirror shows images of whatever one subconsciously wants to see the most, which in Theo's case, is the image of a dead woman," thought Harry. *"Probably his mother who, according to Neville, died in a vaguely suspicious accident in 1985. Theo would have been four or five."* Harry focused on whatever was going on in Theo's bewitched head, brutally pushing aside for the moment any thoughts on what he himself had seen within the mirror. He wasn't big on self-reflection at the best of times, and with Theo ensnared, this was certainly not the best of times.

"Theo, why did you bring me here?" he asked mildly.

"You're so much cleverer than me. I could see her, but I can't get her to speak. I knew if I showed her to you, you could find a way to let her communicate, and she could tell everyone the truth about how she died. Then, she could be at peace. We both could."

Harry closed his eyes and again silently cursed whoever left the mirror here. He assumed it was Dumbledore, but there seemed to be no shortage of idiots at Hogwarts. "Who, Theo? Who do you see in the mirror?"

"It's ... it's my mother," he confirmed without taking his eyes from the mirror. "Can't you see her?"

"No, Theo. The mirror shows something different to whoever looks into it. Tell me about her. What does she look like?"

"Like I said – beautiful. Her eyes are ice-blue and her hair is the color of fresh straw. And she loves me even though ..."
Theo's eyes blinked rapidly. Harry took a step towards him

and readied himself, careful to avoid looking into the mirror himself.

"Even though ... what?" Harry asked gently.

Theo's mouth began to crinkle. "It was because of me. Father wanted a girl. He had his male heir to carry on the line, and he wanted a daughter Draco's age to get a marriage contract with the Malfoys. He made Mother take an illegal potion to increase the chances of a female child. But it didn't work and it made her sick and I almost died as a baby. I was sickly for years ... another reason for him to hate me. And when I was three, he made her try again. That baby was stillborn, and after that she couldn't have any more children." Theo's eyes started to blink rapidly, as Harry tensed. "He was angry all the time after that. At her. At both of us. Drunk a lot, too ... he would say ... '*what's the point of a wife who can't even breed properly?*' And ... that if only they'd found out earlier ... that I'd been a mistake... she could have *aborted* me and started over earlier."

Then, Theo broke out into wracking sobs, his head bowing and his eyes squeezing shut, and Harry made his move while the visual connection was broken. He darted forward to Theo, twisted the boy around by the shoulders to turn him away from the mirror, and placed his hands on either side of the boy's head so he couldn't turn back in its direction. Then, he leaned forward until the two boys were touching foreheads.

"Shhh, Theo. It's okay. I'm here. I told you I would be here for you if you ever needed me, and here I am. But I need you to stay strong and listen to me. And most of all, *I need you to focus on me.* Do *not* look at the mirror."

"But, my mother ..." he said through his tears.

"*It's. Not. Her.* Theo. I'm so sorry but it's not really her. The mirror is a trap. The words over the mirror are backwards writing and they say "*I SHOW NOT YOUR FACE BUT YOUR HEART'S DESIRE.*" And that's just an awful thing to show to someone who's hurting, because to show someone his heart's desire when he can't have it or even touch it is just the cruelest thing you can do to someone. Now *forget* the mirror and just focus on me. Go on with your story. What happened to your mum? I'll be here to listen and be with you and help you, but you have to stay focused on *me.*"

The two slowly turned to sit on the floor with their backs to the mirror. It was still difficult though because somehow, even with his back to it, Harry swore he could *feel* the image of his loving family still in the mirror calling out for his attention, and he was sure it was worse for Theo. Harry put his arm around his sobbing friend's shoulder and held him firmly.

Theo took a few seconds to collect himself. "When I was about five or so, I heard them arguing and poked my head out of my bedroom door. He was drunk again, and he'd just found out that the Malfoys had set up an arranged marriage between Draco and Pansy. He was furious, yelling about what a waste I was and what a failure she was. They argued and ... and he backhanded her hard. She was standing at the top of the stairs and ... she fell."

Theo broke down at that and wept for a moment, resting his head on Harry's shoulder. Not knowing what to say, Harry just held on tight to Theo's shoulder and waited for him to continue.

"After ... that happened, Father saw me and realized I'd seen everything. He grabbed me and said he'd kill me if I didn't go along with his story. When the aurors came, he

told them that I'd bumped into her on accident while running down the hall and that's why she lost her balance and fell. I said it was true even though it must have been obvious I was lying. Not that it mattered. We're an Ancient and Noble House, so none of them wanted to look too closely at how the Lord's wife ended up dead. But Alex knew. That's why he gave me his Rememberall – in case Father ever tried to change my memories so that I *believed* his story. Alex didn't want me to carry the guilt for what Father did, but he made me promise not to tell anyone because ... because Father would kill me." Theo laughed brokenly through his tears and wiped his sleeve across his face. "Father wants to kill me anyway. He's joked about it enough. He actually jokes at dinner about how he many different ways he could kill me and get away with it. I think he's just waiting for a good excuse. That's why ... when I saw ... I thought she was a ghost or a spirit or maybe the mirror let you talk to the dead. And if she could accuse him, maybe the Ministry would do ... *something!*"

Theo's whole body shook with silent tears as Harry rubbed his back while trying unsuccessfully to come up with something – anything – comforting to say. The boy's distress was so loud and heartfelt that Harry almost didn't hear the cough. *Almost*. He spared a quick glance over towards the entrance to the room and saw nothing. Then, he looked at the floor and noticed telltale footprints on the dusty floor. Two sets belonging to Theo and himself, and a third set that looked like prints from a pair of trainers that led to an alcove directly across the room where the boys were sitting.

"Theo?" Harry whispered. The boy slowly looked up into Harry's suddenly intense eyes. "I need you to keep very calm and still. Keep your eyes on me, and keep your back to that mirror, okay? Can you *promise* to do that?" Theo nodded slowly. And then, Harry *moved*, snapping out his

wand and standing as he cast. "**VENTUS!**" He put as much power as he could into the air-generating spell and was rewarded with a powerful gust of wind that enveloped the intruder in a cloud of thick dust that had him coughing uncontrollably. But more than that, the wind also caused the edges of the invisibility cloak the other person was wearing to flap up, revealing the legs of a boy in Gryffindor robes wearing the same expensive new trainers that Harry's brother had shown off at Christmas dinner the previous day. Theo watched in surprise before stiffening in fear at what sounded like a feral beast somewhere nearby. Then, he realized it was Harry ... growling.

"ACCIO JIM POTTER!"

Jim yelped as his legs were pulled out from under him, and he banged his head as it hit the floor. The invisibility cloak fell away completely as the boy slid feet-first towards his brother. Disoriented, he tried to pull his wand out of his pocket, but Harry kicked at his hand and the wand went flying across the room. Then, Harry jumped on top of Jim, landing hard astride the other boy's stomach and weighing down his arms. Jim coughed in pain as the air was knocked out of him. Instantly, Harry had his left hand around Jim's throat with his thumb just below the Adam's apple and the tip of his wand sticking painfully into the flesh below Jim's chin.

"Hello, Little Brother," Harry said through clenched teeth. "So *glad* you could join us." There was a terrible rasping edge to Harry's voice that Theo had never heard from him before. Jim froze. He couldn't move easily anyway, and from this position, Harry had his choice of crushing Jim's larynx or shooting a spell straight into his head. The Boy-Who-Lived looked up into his brother's deathly green eyes, and after four months of calling Harry a "dark wizard," Jim

suddenly wondered just how dangerous his brother might really be. He wasn't the only one.

"Theo?" said Harry in a commanding voice without ever moving or breaking eye contact with Jim, "are you still looking at me and not the mirror?"

"Y-yes, Harry," said Theo. His own voice cracked in anxiety. When Harry had held Malfoy at wandpoint back on Halloween night, he'd talked in a light and playful manner even as he threatened to shoot Draco in the face with a fireworks spell. Looking back, it had been like a cat toying with a mouse it had caught. This was different, a much more dangerous predator who was not in any kind of playful mood.

"Good. Now, I want you to go out that door without looking back and return to the dorm. I'll be along shortly."

"N-no. I'm ... I won't leave you alone with him, Harry."

"It's okay, Theo. I can handle him."

Silence hung in the air. "I'm not worried about *him* hurting *you*, Harry," Theo said quietly.

With that, Harry smiled, still with his eyes locked on Jim, who swallowed at the sight. To him, Harry might as well be baring his fangs. "It's okay, Theo. I already promised Neville. No death, dismemberment or permanent injury. Now go on back to the dorm. Jim and I are just going to have a little chat. Brother to brother."

Slowly, Theo edged his way around the twins who seemed frozen in some violent tableau, like living statues of Cain and Abel. At the door, he almost turned around when Harry spoke again in that frightening voice Theo had never heard

from him before tonight. "*Don't. Look. Back.*" He was suddenly alarmed to realize how much Harry's voice reminded him of his father's voice during his darker rants. Theo took a deep breath and exited the room, pulling the door shut behind him and hoping that he wasn't leaving the scene of Jim Potter's imminent murder.

Harry neither moved nor relaxed his grip, and his eyes bored into Jim's. He spoke softly but with such coldness that the other boy shivered. "So, did you enjoy the show, Jim? One slimy Slytherin snake comforting another who was crying over his dead mother and his murderous Death Eater father. I'm impressed you could keep from laughing. I bet you can't wait to tell all your Gryffindor friends about it."

Jim coughed. "Harry, it's not..."

"*Shut. Up.* Don't even pretend with me. You followed us with your little invisibility cloak hoping to get us into trouble. Finding us weeping in front of Dumbledore's new toy was just gravy. You have no *idea*..." Harry shook for a second, his thumb digging just a little deeper into Jim's throat. Jim's eyes widened in fear.

"You Gryffindors ... with your games and your pranks and your ... *adventures*. You have no idea what it's like to be Theo Nott and live each day knowing that your own father might kill you on a drunken whim. Or what it's like to be Harry Potter and worry that you'll drop a plate while doing the dishes and get locked up in your boot cupboard for a day. Or maybe a *week*. This is not a game to us, Jim, because *Slytherins don't play games*. Theo and I are what we are because it's how we survive. Do you understand what I'm saying, Jim?"

"Y-yes, Harry. I understand."

"No. No, I don't think you do, Little Brother. So let me be a little more direct." Harry leaned forward without relaxing his grip or moving his wand, until his face was less than a foot from Jim's. "Since literally the day we first met, you have told nearly everyone who will listen that I am a dark wizard. So now, I want you to listen to what the dark wizard has to say and believe it with all of your tiny shriveled heart. If *any* harm comes to Theo Nott and I trace it back to the Big Fat Mouth of the *Boy-Who-Lived*, I swear to you on the souls of the parents who abandoned me that you will learn to fear me more than you have *ever* feared Voldemort. Do you understand *that*, Little Brother?"

Jim, unable to speak due to the pressure on his throat, nodded urgently. Slowly, Harry relaxed his hands and rose up, never taking his wand off Jim. Then, he turned and headed towards the door. "Nice cloak," he said casually as he passed by it. "I guess I know what *Daddy* got his Number-One-Son for Christmas."

He had just put his hand to the door when Jim coughed out his name. "Harry...! Wait!" He hesitated, waiting for Jim to continue.

"What did you see ... in the mirror? What did you see?"

Harry turned back to his brother who was still resting on the floor. "You first," he replied coldly.

Jim swallowed again, steeled himself, and turned to face the mirror. Then, he gasped. Part of him was strangely unsurprised by the reflected image now that he knew what the mirror did, but Jim Potter would never have guessed in a million years how similar it was to what Harry had seen. James and Lily were there, and Harry and Jim were loving

brothers, though this version of Harry had hair as unruly as Jim's own and wore identical Gryffindor robes. In fact, Jim couldn't tell which of the twins in the mirror was which, for neither of them had been marked with an identifying scar. It seemed that in the world of *his* heart's desire, Voldemort had never come to their house and torn the twins apart.

"*POTTER!*" barked Harry after a few seconds. Jim's attention snapped away from the seductive image and back to the reality of an angry Slytherin glaring at him. "Well?"

Jim swallowed. "I saw Mom and Dad and myself and ..." The words died in his throat, a truth he could not bring himself to admit to any Slytherin but especially not this one. "And that's all. I'm an only child."

Harry snorted as if he'd expected that answer.

"And you?" Jim asked. "What did you see?"

"Just myself," Harry lied just as easily. "Which is all I've ever needed. I'm in my mid-twenties, I think, and wearing formal robes as I'm sworn into the Wizengamot as the new Lord Potter." He sneered hatefully at his twin. "Presumably because James Potter lies rotting in his grave." Then, he turned with a flourish and strode out of the room, leaving an angry and shaken Jim behind. After a moment's hesitation, Jim stood up slowly and walked out as well, snatching up his wand and his father's cloak as he left.

Seconds later, there was a shimmer in an archway in the far corner as Dumbledore allowed his invisibility spell to lapse. The archway itself led to a secret passageway that only the Headmaster could navigate – he'd come as quickly as he could once he sensed the mystic alarm indicating that the Mirror had ensnared a victim. Exhaling slowly, Dumbledore replaced his wand inside his robe. He'd kept it at the ready,

just in case it was necessary to separate the Potter twins before violence erupted, but despite Harry's cold fury, the old wizard believed that there was no murder in the boy's heart, just a terrible wound that couldn't be healed. And so the old wizard stayed his hand as long as possible to watch invisibly. Still, it was ... unnerving to see Harry Potter instantly shift from the compassion and protectiveness he held for the Nott boy to the ruthless efficiency with which he disarmed and then threatened Jim.

Dumbledore looked back to the Mirror of Erised with revulsion. He'd been working on the modifying the mirror's enchantments all night and had only taken a break for an hour to review some notes on its history that he kept in his office. The door had to be remain unlocked while he was harmonizing the cursed mirror with the school's protective wards, but at 3 a.m. and with so few students in the castle, he felt sure it was safe. And yet *three* students managed to find the wretched thing in under an hour! He grimaced at the implications. Had the Mirror of Erised itself somehow reached out for potential victims? Or was there some other force at work? Or perhaps Fate was just toying with the Potter Twins as it had for more than eleven years.

The Headmaster shook his head. He'd planned to spend another few days finishing his modifications, but now he was reluctant to leave the mirror for even one more hour than necessary where students might encounter it. He closed his eyes and sent a mental command for a house elf to fetch him a pot of strong coffee. He would finish his work tonight whatever it took and then move the mirror to the Third Floor. As he moved closer to the foul thing, Dumbledore ignored the images of dead and estranged family members waving to him from the other side of the mirror's glass. Attuned as he now was to the inner workings of the Mirror of Erised, its dark magic and the regrets they

reflected held no purchase on him. He was more troubled by the images he'd seen reflected for the Potter Twins – two boys so much alike and with so much in common, but who now, it seemed, could only cause each other pain. With a heavy heart, Albus Dumbledore returned to his work.

The Sentinel

CHAPTER 23: The Sentinel

Harry found a relieved Theo waiting for him just ten feet down the corridor. After reassuring his friend that, yes, Jim Potter was still very much alive, the two returned to the Slytherin dungeons. There, Harry and Theo stayed up talking until well after the sun came up before crashing and sleeping until noon. At lunch, Harry briefly made eye contact with his brother – non-threateningly, Harry thought, though Jim still quailed at the sight of him – and it seemed clear that the Boy-Who-Lived had taken his words to heart. Ron glanced at Harry without interest and took no notice of Theo at all, so Harry assumed for the time being that Jim would not be gossiping to anyone about the previous night's scene.

The remainder of the Christmas holidays fell back into a normal routine save for a notable reversal of circumstances. Theo, who had previously suffered from fits of insomnia for years, now slept more soundly, presumably due to the catharsis of finally talking about his mother's death with someone he trusted. He was more relaxed during the days when talking to other students and he even helped the Twins prank Percy. He'd also gotten tired of listening to Ron's bragging and challenged the Gryffindor to a chess match. He lost, of course – the Weasel was a genuine prodigy at chess, surprising for such an otherwise mediocre student – but he'd lasted longer than anyone below Fifth Year who'd played Ron since the year began. Ron had even looked worried at several points, and after the game was over, he actually shook Theo's hand and asked if they could play again sometime.

Conversely, it was now Harry who'd developed difficulty sleeping. He was no more prone to nightmares than before, but now, those nightmares were broken up by strange dreams where he and the Potters lived together in familial bliss, including a few where he was somehow a Gryffindor with awful hair *of which he was inexplicably proud!* Eventually, he was forced to acknowledge the truth – that there was some small, deeply buried part of him that, despite everything he'd been through, still wanted to be part of the Potter family. It was a ridiculous notion to be sure, particularly since the Git's "heart's desire" was that he'd never even been born. Harry had to admit that the Mirror would make a fiendish trap. If it could make him feel a longing for the love of the Potters, surely it could trap Voldemort in some equally absurd fantasy.

Having now added insomnia to his already lengthy list of personality quirks, Harry had taken to wandering the Slytherin dorms on those nights when sleep became impossible. He was searching mainly for snakes hidden in the artwork and architecture that he hadn't talked to yet, but he seemed to have found them all. The operative phrase being "*seemed to*," as there were six rooms he had not yet entered – the six prefect bedrooms. Harry didn't know how the other houses worked, but in Slytherin, all six prefects resided in private bedrooms that doubled as offices, all of which could be found in a side corridor called Prefect's Row that branched off from the common room. Harry assumed that all of these rooms would be warded against intrusion, but unless there were concealed areas (which, admittedly, there probably were), the prefects' rooms were the only rooms in the whole dungeon he hadn't entered. And so it was, just past midnight on the last Saturday morning before the holidays ended, that Harry found himself nervously entering Prefect's Row, a place no First Year Slytherin ever wanted to be without permission.

Ahead of him was a dimly lit corridor about forty feet long. There were three equidistant doors on each side, with the male prefects on the left and the females on the right. He started with the closest on his left, Fifth Year Prefect Titus Mitchell, on the entirely baseless theory that Titus (as the youngest of the three males) might be less paranoid about security than any of the other prefects. Harry crept up to Mitchell's door, looked around nervously, and cast the Alohamora. The irony that he was using the "illegal lock-picking charm" for the same illicit purpose for which he had chided Hermione months before was not lost on him. In any case, the door did not open, which meant the youngest and least pragmatic of the six Slytherin prefects had more sense than whoever put Fluffy in his room on the Third Floor. On the bright side, there was no loud alarm nor any other sign that he'd been identified as a possible intruder. Privately, Harry decided that if he ever became a prefect, he'd Charm his room so that anyone who even tried to break in would end up with purple skin for a year.

With some trepidation, he tried the Alohamora on each of the other five doors, all to no effect. Annoyed and dejected, Harry turned back down towards the common room. In retrospect, it should have been obvious that a First Year, no matter how skilled, wouldn't be able to simply break into any prefect's private rooms. They wouldn't be prefects if they weren't, at a minimum, powerful enough to defend their own property. Then, suddenly, Harry stopped.

*"Powerful," he thought. "Prefects are powerful, relative to other students at least, and selected primarily **for** their power. Not just for academic achievement (which is, itself, one type of power, in a school at least), but for raw magical power and skill, for family reputation and financial backing, for popularity in the House and the charisma to build social alliances, and even for physical prowess. I mean, seriously,*

Marcus Flint is in danger of flunking half his classes but he's still the Sixth Year prefect due to family connections and Quidditch skills."

Harry turned to look back down Prefect's Row as he recalled Egbert's cryptic words from weeks before. *"But the Prince of Slytherin, whoever or whatever he is, is presumably more powerful within Slytherin than a mere prefect. So in comparison, the six prefects are 'lesser powers,' and Prefect's Row would be 'the nests where the lesser powers dwelt.'"*

Carefully, Harry walked all the way back down the dark corridor, past all six bedrooms, until his path was blocked by a blank wall. Except it wasn't really a blank wall at all. It looked more like an archway that had been sealed over years or even centuries before with grey bricks. At some point, a large crack must have developed in the wall which had been patched over with a chalky white mortar, leaving the impression of a jagged scar several inches thick in places that ran all of the way from the top right corner to the bottom left. Harry paused.

"Why would they repair a crack in a Hogwart's wall with mortar when they have magic?"

He gingerly reached out to feel the crack and realized that it was not mortar at all. The "crack" had been carefully painted onto the stonework. Examining it more closely, he noticed a faint scale-like texture to the paint and realized the jagged crack was actually a very crudely drawn snake. But then, he saw that even its very crudeness was deliberate, as no casual viewer would have ever recognized it as a snake unless specifically looking for one. Harry cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Am I addressing the Sentinel?"

Instantly, the crack shifted on the wall, with the thicker piece at the bottom rising up to a point a foot above Harry's head and the rest dropping down towards a horizontal coil a few feet above the ground. It was now *definitely* a snake, white with grey eyes, and a large cobra from the way its hood fanned out menacingly as it regarded the boy. It was, without a doubt, the most intimidating snake Harry had encountered since arriving at Hogwarts.

"The Sentinel am I, charged by the Founder to guard the Prince's Lair. Who art thou, Speaker, to address me thus in the Founder's own sacred tongue?"

Harry's eyebrows shot up. He'd met many very old snakes in the castle, but none so old that they actually sounded archaic.

"My name is Harry Potter, Sentinel. I seek knowledge about the one called the Prince of Slytherin. I was told that you might be able to help me."

The Sentinel hissed angrily. *"Thou art a child, ignorant and weak. Thou hast done nothing to earn passage save bleat entreaties in the Founder's tongue after prizing ill-gotten secrets from loose-tongued serpents. Thy humility marks thee as unworthy, and so, thy ... **request** is denied. Begone!"*

Harry was shocked. He had never been spoken to rudely by *any* snake he'd encountered, and now the Sentinel said "request" felt like sheer contempt. Harry took a step back and then stopped himself, thinking deeply about what the Sentinel said ... and what exactly the Sentinel's views on the topic of "worthiness" might be. Then, after taking a deep breath, Harry boldly stepped forward again.

"You are gravely mistaken, Sentinel, especially in your assumption that I was making any sort of ... *request*. And what you call humility was meant to be simple diplomacy which I now see was wasted, and so I will be more direct. I am Harry Potter, Heir Presumptive of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter. I am a Speaker of the Founder's Sacred Tongue. I have quested throughout this castle in search of you and earned the trust and respect of the wisest of Hogwarts' serpents. Though I am young, I am no child, for my childhood was burned away by cruel neglect and brutality as soon as I could walk. I am not ignorant, for I was cunning enough to lay low a mountain troll despite my youth. I am not weak, for I have already crossed wands with my greatest rival within the House of Slytherin and humbled him, instilling in all my peers a fear of my power. Like a shadow, I pass unnoticed beneath the gaze of the most dangerous dark lord of our time even as I proudly aid those who seek his ruin. I have seen my heart's desire reflected in the darkest of cursed objects, and my will was strong enough turn aside from it. So, Sentinel, if these are not enough to earn my passage, then you will tell me what more I must do to satisfy you. Otherwise, serpent, *you will obey my command and reveal to me the secrets of the Prince of Slytherin!*"

The Sentinel's angry hissing grew louder and more incoherent as Harry spoke, until finally, after Harry issued his final command, it grew silent and still. Then, without any further response, the Sentinel twisted itself back into its original shape and resumed the apparent form of a simple crack in the wall. Harry deflated, disappointed that his attempt at bluster had been unsuccessful, when he heard a very soft grinding sound coming from the wall. Suddenly, the bricks that made up the wall split along the crack, not collapsing so much as peeling away in a manner similar to the wall that marked the entrance to Diagon Alley. With

seconds, where the brick wall had been, there was now an entryway into ... darkness.

Casting a Lumos with his wand, Harry stepped forward. He need not have bothered – a soon as he crossed the threshold, the darkness of the entryway gave way to a room brilliantly illuminated by glass chandeliers, each crystal reflecting the light of dozens of enchanted candles. And what a room the Prince's Lair was! The secret chamber looked to be twenty yards wide and twice as long with a twenty-foot vaulted ceiling. All of the walls were covered in oak paneling, with polished marble floors covered in elegant rugs. The wall to Harry's right was marked with a massive stone fireplace easily big enough for a man to walk through without ducking, and there appeared to be a fresh bucket of Floo powder next to it. On either side of the fireplace were several massive bookshelves full of tomes so old and mysterious-looking that Harry resolved never to tell Hermione Granger about this room, lest she tear the Slytherin dungeon apart stone by stone to get at them. The wall on the left bore what looked like forty to fifty small silver nameplates meticulously arranged with room still for dozens more. The far wall was completely dominated by a massive tapestry. Most of the writing was too small to read from across the room, but the words "HERE BE THE HEIRS OF SALAZAR SLYTHERIN" clearly indicated that it was the Founder's family tree.

In the middle of the Lair was a long mahogany table, with three chairs on each side, each also mahogany with emerald green upholstery. Rising up from the back of each chair were two matching brass finials elegantly cast into the shapes of adder heads. But it was the seventh chair that dominated Harry's attention, for even calling it a chair seemed so grossly inadequate as to be an insult. It was, without a doubt, the single most magnificent piece of

furniture that Harry had ever seen. Shaking off his amazement, Harry stood tall and spoke out with confidence.

"Good evening to you all. My name is Harry Potter. I am honored to stand before you." The veritable *chorus* of hisses that welcomed him to the room made him grin from ear to ear.

A few hours later, it was Harry's turn to rouse Theo from slumber and drag him off to a secret room containing an ancient and somewhat sinister magical artifact. Once he had the boy inside the Lair, Harry explained where they were, why they were there, what it all meant, and, oh by the way, he could talk to snakes. Understandably, Theodore Nott immediately fainted dead away.

Pairings

CHAPTER 24: Pairings

7 January 1992

Harry spent as much time as possible in the Lair over the last weekend of Christmas break, with Theo covering for him with the castle's other residents. The boy knew his time was short. It would be insanely risky for him to try to sneak past all six prefects to access the Lair once they'd returned to school, and even Theo's ring wouldn't help since he couldn't hold his breath while speaking the password to enter the Lair or close it behind him. Consequently, Harry needed to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible, both by interviewing the room's various serpent inhabitants about the Prince of Slytherin and by perusing the small number of rare books he was permitted to withdraw from the room for personal use. He very deliberately did *not* take any books which the faculty might deem "dark," although he soon learned to his annoyance just how ambiguous the term "dark" was according to the school's vague guidelines.

He also took the time to master the Gemino Charm which, in conjunction with Hermione's innovations with the Switching Charm, allowed him to make a small portable copy of Salazar Slytherin's family tree that he could take for later study. He used the same spells to copy the names and dates on the silver placards that covered one of the walls and assemble them into a single document full of names to research, the earliest of which dated back nearly to the time of the Founders. The next-to-last name on the list made him laugh out loud. No wonder Draco expected his father to be able to fix any problem! He now genuinely

looked forward to meeting Lucius Malfoy, and he hoped Draco was on hand when he finally did.

The first Tuesday after classes resumed also meant the return of Hermione's study group. Initially, there were three absentees: Lavender Brown and the Patil sisters. A few minutes into the session, Padma Patil arrived with her book bag and sat in her usual seat. Then, with a somewhat affected bit of throat-clearing, she began what sounded like a prepared speech.

"I have been asked to inform you that Lavender and Parvati will no longer be attending this study group as it conflicts with a different study group which they have been asked to oversee. I have also been asked to convey to you all that this is in no way intended as a slight to any of you, least of all you Hermione, as you are all '*super-cool*' and you, Hermione, in particular are '*totally awesome*.' However, loyalty to House Gryfindor and the sincerity of Jim Potter's pleas for academic assistance forced them to make this difficult choice. Lavender and Parvati sincerely hope that this will not affect their friendship with any of you and wish you all the best of luck on your exams and in all your future endeavors. That concludes their message."

Everyone stared at Padma for several seconds with varying degrees of confusion. Finally, Blaise spoke. "I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that '*totally awesome*' and '*super-cool*' were the only words from that speech that were quoted verbatim."

"Correct. For clarity's sake, I did take the liberty of translating the message from Parvati-speak to the Queen's English," Padma said drily.

"Much appreciated," said Harry. "So to sum up, they wanted you to tell us that they can't join us because they'd prefer to attend a Gryffindor-only study session that Jim has deliberately scheduled at the same time as our own. Is that about the size of it?"

"Yes."

"Out of Gryffindor loyalty?!" spat Hermione in shocked disbelief. "She's been complaining about Jim almost as much as I have!"

Padma shrugged. "That's the message I was asked to convey ... minus some nonsense words which I assume came from *Teen Witch Weekly*."

"Uh-huh," said Blaise. "So what's the real reason?"

"I beg your pardon."

"What Blaise means," said Harry, "is that you pointedly described that as '*the message you were asked to convey*' which is not necessarily the same thing as '*the actual truth*.' So what do you think is their real reason for ditching us?"

"What makes you think I have any insights into their motivations?"

"You're the clever twin," Harry deadpanned.

Padma blinked ... and then laughed. "Honestly, if Slytherin had more people like you and Blaise and fewer Pansy Parkinsons, I might have considered your House. The short answer to your question is ... capitalism."

"What?" asked Hermione. "I don't understand."

"She means Jim Potter is paying the two of them to study with the Gryffindors instead of us," said Justin Finch-Fletchley. Everyone stared at him for a few seconds. Harry and Blaise actually looked impressed. "What? I may be a Hufflepuff, but I'm a Muggleborn from a wealthy family. Of *course* I know what the word '*capitalism*' means."

"And to be fair," said Padma, "it's not like it's bribery. Apparently, the Boy-Who-Lived and his little entourage are all genuinely struggling in Potions which is Lavender's strongest area. So they're paying her two galleons per session to tutor Jim, Ron, Dean and Seamus in that subject."

"So why is Parvati there?" asked Hermione somewhat crossly.

Padma sniffed. "Because Lavender will be there, which is the only reason she ever came to *this* group. My sister is ... not academically inclined. In any case, Hermione, I think that between you, me and Harry, we probably have Potions covered even without Lavender, so perhaps we should forget about them and get started reviewing?"

Hermione looked like she wanted to say something else, but Harry said, "I agree," before she could continue. She shot him a look at the interruption, and he shot her one right back which said "*we'll talk more later.*" With that, the group got to work and spent a solid two hours reviewing the homework assignments that had been made before the Christmas break. At the end of the session, the group split up, but Harry nodded to Hermione, and the two of them went after Padma. They caught up with her before she left the library and pulled her aside with Hermione enacting a privacy spell.

"So," said Harry, "what was the long answer?"

"Excuse me?"

"You said the short answer was capitalism. What's the long answer you didn't want to give in front of the group?"

Padma shook her head and grimaced. "Slytherins," she said with a mild annoyance. Then, she looked back and forth between Harry and Hermione. "Okay, this isn't anything they've *said*. It's just my observations. So please don't go around repeating this." The other two nodded seriously. "First of all, Hermione, Lavender really does have a lot of respect for you and the way you've handled yourself as a Muggleborn who's new to our world and for how readily you've adapted to magical culture. But what I'm about to say may offend some of your ... well, your Muggle sensibilities, for lack of a better phrase, so please don't hold it against her or me."

Hermione stiffened a bit. "I'll do my best not to. Please proceed."

"As part of their agreement, Jim and the other boys are not just paying Lavender, they also had to promise to study hard, to be on their best behavior in class, to avoid losing House points, and to act like respectable young gentlemen, at least when she and Parvati are around. In short, I think Lavender sees this as a chance to spend time with Jim in a situation where she can influence his behavior and determine whether he might be ... suitable."

Hermione's eyes narrowed while Harry put a hand over his mouth. He had a feeling where this was all going. "Suitable for what?" Hermione asked slowly.

"Marriage, of course," replied Padma simply.

Harry struggled not to laugh at the look on Hermione's face. "Marriage?!" she spluttered. "They're eleven!"

"Hermione," Harry said with a chuckle, "Draco and Pansy have been engaged since they were *five*."

She actually choked at that. Harry laughed even louder and even Padma seemed amused.

"Marriage contracts ... at the age of *five*! I guess I'll be an old maid if I'm not married before my teens! Please tell me that this is not something I need to be worried about!"

"It's not," Harry reassured her. "The vast majority of magicals get married just like Muggles do. They meet, fall in love, and decide to spend their lives together. Divorce can be a bit problematic because there are usually magical oaths involved at the marriage ceremony, but generally most wizards and witches don't use marriage contracts except maybe as the magical equivalent of prenuptial agreements."

"Yes," said Padma. "Things only get complicated and legalistic – well, in Britain, at least – when you're an heir to a Wizengamot family. If you are, marrying the wrong person can affect your inheritance rights and possibly even the status of your family's seat. In Lavender's case, she's the Heir Presumptive of the Noble House of Brown. And the *Noble* House of Brown would like very much to become the *Ancient and Noble* House of Brown. But they need political support to get elevated. I think ... no, I'm *quite sure* that Lavender believes that marrying the Boy-Who-Lived who is *also* the second son of House Potter and – no offense, Harry – the *avored* son of House Potter will get them that support."

Even Harry was surprised at Padma's bluntness. "So being the Boy-Who-Lived trumps being the Potter Heir Presumptive?" he asked with some annoyance.

She shook her head. "No, there's more to it than that. You see, the Browns are a matrilineal family." She went on to explain for Hermione's benefit. "That is to say, pursuant to the family bylaws enacted when the Browns first joined the Wizengamot, Heirship passes exclusively to the eldest witch in the Brown line of succession. If Lavender wants to keep her Heir Presumptive status and eventually become the Lady Brown, anyone she marries has to be willing to change his last name to Brown or, at the very least, take a hyphenated name and accept that any children will be named Brown. Because the Potters are Ancient and Noble, that's not an option for *you*, Harry, at least not without sacrificing your right to become Lord Potter some day. You can marry whoever you want so long as your spouse takes Potter as her surname – or his, I guess, if that's your preference – but you can't change your name or add a name of lesser rank to your own without surrendering your Heirship. As second son, that's not an issue for Jim so long as you stand between him and becoming Heir himself."

Harry shook his head. "I swear, I have been poring over this crap for months, and there's still always some new bit of minutia for me to discover."

Padma shrugged. "It's not an issue that arises very often. There are only a few matrilineal families left, along with a few others that are strictly patrilineal. They were more common when the Wizengamot was founded, but by their very nature, such families are more likely to face line extinction because they're more selective about who can carry on the line than those houses that favor gender neutrality. Susan Bones' situation is the opposite of

Lavender's, as the Bones are a patrilineal family whose only surviving members are women, Susan and her aunt Amelia. There won't be a Bones Heir and consequently there won't be a Bones Lord unless Susan gets married to some wizard willing to take her name and then produces a male wizarding child. Likewise, the Black family will probably lose its seat altogether when Sirius Black finally dies – there are no other living males descended from the Blacks who aren't disqualified because their surname is different. The family's money and estates will probably go to the nearest legal heirs, but the Black Wizengamot seat will remain vacant until some Noble family is elevated to take its place." She made a face at the mention of the notorious Black family. "No great loss there, of course. Anyway, the majority of Wizengamot families don't distinguish between male and female heirs, although surnames still sometimes remain an issue for witches."

"Hmm," said Hermione as she digested all this. "What about Parvati? Is she husband-hunting too?"

"Oh, no," said Padma easily. "She's been engaged since she was three."

Hermione started coughing uncontrollably. Padma smiled and looked at Harry. "I can see why you keep doing that to her. It's quite amusing."

"*Three!*" Hermione interrupted.

"Yes. The Kumar Pasha, the wealthiest and most powerful of India's wizards, had a son born a year before Parvati and me. He wanted to form a political and business alliance with the Patils, so he proposed a marriage contract to our father. I've met the son, Sanjeev, a few times. He seems nice and

looks like he'll grow up to be good looking, and anyway, he'll be absurdly rich."

"Hang on. You were three-year-old identical twins. How did they decide which of you would become engaged? Is Parvati the older twin?" asked Harry out of curiosity. Padma smiled at him again, but this time, it actually sent a shiver down his back. *This* smile was what he imagined his own fake smiles used to look like to others back when he was still pretending to like the Potters.

"Age and birth status had nothing to do with it. Our eldest brother is the Patil Heir, and we have several older siblings besides him. No, as I understand it, my father literally flipped a coin, with one daughter guaranteed a life of wealth and privilege, complete with multiple palaces, jewels on every finger, and an army of servants to wait on her every need. The other daughter would have to study hard and get a job."

Padma paused and her brow furrowed. "Did that sound as bitter out loud as it did in my head?" The other two grimaced and then reluctantly nodded.

Slytherin Maneuvers Pt 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

CHAPTER 25: Slytherin Maneuvers (Pt. 1)

14 April 1992

To Harry's amazement, and despite the presence of a homicidal dark lord and a Git-Who-Lived sharing the same school, second semester had been almost ... boring. Hermione's study group survived the loss of Lavender and Parvati, although there was almost a mutiny when she announced in the middle of March that she wanted to start revising for the end-of-term exams. The Gryffindor Four (as Jim, Ron, Dean and Seamus came to be known) improved dramatically in Potions class under Lavender's tutelage ... at least until Draco in a display of childishness began to sabotage Jim's potions on a regular basis. Jim could never prove it to Snape's satisfaction, not that Snape needed much of a reason to dock points from "The Other Potter," as the Potions Master insisted on calling Jim even to his face.

Practically the only excitement in the first three months had come during the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch match back in February. Madame Hooch had apparently come down with some minor ailment and couldn't referee, and so Snape, inexplicably, was pressed into service as her replacement. Harry and Blaise privately concluded that he must have lost a bet to one of the other professors. The man's general disdain for Quiddich was well-known, and Harry was surprised that he even knew the rules well enough to officiate. In fact, many of the Slytherins were

taking bets themselves on whether Snape would just start making up rules in order to penalize the Gryffindors. Apparently, the Lions were afraid of the same thing because Jim was so focused he caught the Snitch in under five minutes – a new school record – much to the embarrassment of the Badgers' somewhat cocky new Seeker, Third Year Cedric Diggory.

This early morning found Harry sitting in the Library reading the disguised Occlumency book Snape had given him. It was Tuesday, and classes were canceled, as most students would be leaving that afternoon for Easter Break and not returning until the next Monday evening. Unfortunately, quite a few more Slytherins were staying at school than had remained over the Christmas holidays. This annoyed Harry, as he'd hoped to spend time in the Lair when there were no students around, but both Seventh Year prefects were staying behind to study for their upcoming NEWTS, and their respective rooms were on either side of the Lair's entrance.

Hermione and Neville sat across the table from Harry studying when the door to the Library opened up and, to Harry's surprise, Hagrid entered. He'd had a few reasonably decent interactions with the half-giant, but they weren't on close terms. In fact, Hagrid actually seemed somewhat nervous around Harry, who assumed that Jim and Ron had poisoned the man against him with anti-Slytherin propaganda. Regardless, the spectacle of Hagrid in the Hogwarts Library was enough to catch Harry's interest. He was further intrigued when Hermione and Neville began watching Hagrid intently while trying (and failing) to be discreet about it. Hagrid himself was equally amusing as he sought to make his way stealthily through the Library to the section on Magical Creatures and then back out again with several books about dragon-breeding.

It was like watching an elephant trying to tip-toe. As he left, Neville and Hermione followed him with their eyes. Then, they looked at each other and proceeded to exchange a series of truly remarkable glares and facial expressions with the (completely unsuccessful) intention of communicating with one another while keeping Harry out of the loop. The gist of it, he intuited easily, was that Neville wanted Hermione to tell Harry about what Hagrid was up to, presumably to get Harry's advice, but for some reason, she was reluctant. Finally, their efforts at Gryffindor "subtlety" became too excruciating to watch, so he put his book down and raised a privacy shield.

"So," he said brightly. "Hagrid's breeding dragons, I take it?"

They both looked at him in shock. "How did *you* know that?" Hermione asked.

"I didn't. I guessed and you just confirmed it. How far along is he?"

Hermione wouldn't answer, so Neville finally said, "Little Norbert is supposed to hatch in another week or two."

"Norbert?! Of course. That's ... that's adorable. Plus, we've already reached the 'accessory before the fact' stage! Tell me, Hermione, have you looked up the sentence for illegal dragon-breeding yet?" Harry asked with a smirk.

The witch seemingly couldn't decide whether to be more annoyed with Harry or worried about Hagrid. "A minimum of three years in Azkaban," she finally said.

"Hmm. Well, I wouldn't worry. I'm sure that's just for grown-ups. Any minor accomplices will just be expelled. So, Neville, I'm guessing that you want sneaky Slytherin advice

on how to resolve this calamity in the making, but I'm curious as to why Hermione here *doesn't* want to involve me. Dare I hope it's because she cares enough about me to *not* want me to get a criminal record?" He wriggled his eyebrows at her.

Hermione scoffed. "No! I mean, I don't want *anyone* to get a criminal record. It's just ... I know you're a Slytherin and we're Gryffindors but..." she turned to Neville in annoyance. "We shouldn't *have* to ask Harry *every time* we need a cunning plan. Gryffindors can be cunning when we need to be!

Summoning incredible reserves of will, Harry did not laugh out loud. Neville just shook his head. "Hermione," he said despairingly. "Right now the closest thing we have to a cunning plan is the one *Ron* came up with."

Harry did snicker at that, albeit apologetically. "Sorry. You're going with *the Weasel's plan*? Please tell me what it is. I need something to brighten my day."

The two Lions glared at him. "It's not *that* bad," Hermione said in a huff. "Ronald's brother Charlie works at a dragon sanctuary in Romania. In a few weeks, after the dragon hatches and has grown a bit, some of his friends will fly over via broom from Romania and pick up the caged dragon from the Astronomy Tower. Then, they'll fly it back to the sanctuary."

Harry nodded at that and then started ticking off points one by one on his fingers. "A baby dragon. In a cage. Breathing fire. Transported on wooden broomsticks. Presumably flying in tandem. All the way from here to Romania." Harry shook his head. "And these are friends of Charlie Weasley's, you say? Are you quite sure they're not his enemies that

he's scheming to destroy? You already know the penalty for unlicensed dragon breeding. Have you looked up the penalties for international dragon-smuggling? Because I bet they're a lot worse."

"Harry..." started Neville.

"What kind of dragon?" interrupted Harry.

The two looked at one another. "A Norwegian Ridgeback," said Hermione.

"Uh-huh. And has anyone pointed out to Hagrid that he lives in a wooden hut?"

"Repeatedly," sighed Neville.

"Right. The answer is no, I'm not getting involved. Not when grown men who should know better involve kids our age in criminal activities because 'it's *fun*.' I bet every single person involved in this is a Gryffindor." He shook his head as he took in the ridiculousness of the situation. "Seriously, if you're worried about Hagrid getting into trouble, why don't you just tell McGonagall about it? Lord knows there's worse things at Hogwarts than an illicit baby dragon that the staff will merrily cover up."

"*Professor* McGonagall, Harry," said Hermione, causing the Slytherin to close his eyes and quickly count to ten. "And I don't think that even she will overlook illegal dragon-breeding."

"Which only makes it even more obvious that it's not something First Years should be involved with. I have begged you not to get involved in Jim Potter's crazy schemes 'til I'm blue in the face, and now, you want to risk

expulsion because *a staff member* wants an illegal pet dragon! I don't know what else to say!"

"You don't have to say *anything*, Harry! If you'll recall, *I* didn't want to involve you anyway!" said Hermione angrily before getting up and walking away.

Neville sighed. "Nice going, Harry." He stood and followed his fellow Gryffindor out of the Library. Harry closed his eyes again and rubbed his temples. Too frustrated to return to Occlumency training (which was ironic, as Occlumency was supposed to *help* with emotional control), he packed up his bags and returned to his dorm.

Unfortunately, if he had any hopes that the Slytherins were acting more sensibly than the Gryffindors, they were quickly dashed. Harry walked through the passage door just in time to see Theo hop three times in the direction of his wand which was lying on the floor before losing his balance and falling flat on his face. Nearby, Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were laughing at him with their wands out when they noticed Harry come in. Rather foolishly, they hesitated for a second before targeting him, long enough for Harry to reflexively draw his own wand. Faced with three opponents, Harry ignored them all and pointed his wand behind them.

"ACCIO COFFEE TABLE!" At Harry's command, the coffee table behind the boys slid quickly in his direction, knocking all off their legs out from under them and dumping the three to the ground. Off to one side, Pansy Parkinson tried to stealthily draw her own wand. Without even looking, Harry said, "I wouldn't, Pansy. You wouldn't look quite so fetching covered in boils." She froze, her eyes wide. Meanwhile, Theo recovered his wand, swiftly cast the counter-jinx to the Leg-Locker Curse that had been used on him, and jumped up to stand at Harry's side.

"So, you've been reduced to cravenly bullying your own fellow Slytherins in the Common Room, Malfoy? Your father would be so proud."

"Shut up, Halfblood!" snarled Draco as he climbed to his feet. "You're no more worthy to mention my father than you are to even be a Slytherin!"

Harry shook his head sadly. "Was Halloween that long ago, Malfoy, that you've already forgotten it? You're pretty brave when it's three on one. Do you want to try three on two?"

"Ahem!" said Blaise as he walked into the room twirling his wand. "Three on three, actually. Sorry, Theo. I was taking a nap and didn't hear the commotion."

Harry smiled and looked back at Draco. "Three on three it is, Malfoy. In your case, that's like being hopelessly outnumbered."

Draco's face was a mask of rage. But then, he focused on Theo and sneered. "And to think: the son of Lord Tiberius Nott, dependent on blood traitors, consorting with Mudbloods even. I wonder what your father would say if he knew."

Theo stiffened, but he refused to show fear. "Why don't you go tell him then, Draco? Running around, tattling on people like a spoiled child seems to be your forte."

Harry glanced at Theo with a measure of pride. Then, he looked back at Draco speculatively. "Malfoy, are you ... quite ... sure this is the route you want to take? Do you fully understand how much you're ... escalating things?"

Draco moved closer to the two with a superior expression. "Always target your enemy's greatest weakness. My father

said that was one of the secrets of winning in Slytherin. *Your* greatest weakness is Theo Nott."

Harry crooked an eyebrow at that. *"So your father taught you that, eh, Draco?"* he thought to himself. *"Interesting. I've read that book from the Prince's Lair, as well. The actual quote is 'Target your enemy's greatest weaknesses, but always from the shadows, lest you invite his strongest reprisal.' Do you know what sort of reprisal you're inviting right now?"*

He said none of that, however. "Our disagreement has become awfully public, Malfoy," he said instead, almost amiably. "Maybe we should take this to our dorm room for a more ... civilized discussion."

Draco smiled victoriously. "After you."

Harry put his wand away and confidently walked in the direction of the boys' dorm. Theo walked behind Harry to his right side, glaring at Malfoy and his lackeys as he went past. Blaise fell in behind Harry on the left alongside Theo as they ascended the stairs.

"Harry..." Theo started.

"It's alright, Theo," Harry interrupted calmly. "Everything's fine. I've got this." His voice was low and, while it not as frightening or dangerous as it was last Boxing Day, it nevertheless reminded Theo uncomfortably of how Harry talked that night with Jim Potter in the Mirror Room.

Minutes later, the six Slytherin First Years were in their dorm room facing each other.

"So, tell me, Malfoy. What exactly do you know about Tiberius Nott that you leads you to think your threats

should bother us?"

"I know enough. I know he's a violent drunkard with no patience for blood traitors, particularly in his own family."

Harry nodded. "And despite that, you have no problem with trying to turn him against Theo, no matter what the outcome?"

Draco shrugged as if the question was irrelevant. "What outcome, Potter? Any unpleasantness can be avoided completely. All you have to do is make some ... appropriate gesture - in front of our peers, of course - to acknowledge that you know your place in the Slytherin hierarchy. Which, honestly, I still don't think you even *have* a place in the Slytherin hierarchy, but I suppose you and your hangers-on might be able to play some menial role in the future. But anyway, whatever you choose to do, make it quick. Father might decide to ask Lord Nott over for dinner during the Easter break, and he might ask me questions about what his son was up to."

Draco took a few steps closer to Harry. "Your compassion for someone obviously beneath you is a weakness, Potter. A real Slytherin would have never made himself as vulnerable as you have."

"Blackmail. And very crude, poorly conceived blackmail at that. And such pointless malice. As if he has no goals beyond just making everyone grovel before him, and he doesn't care how many enemies he makes in the process. Has Lucius Malfoy, for some reason, intentionally ruined his own son?"

Harry and Draco engaged in a stare-off for a few seconds before Harry finally deflated and looked down, beaten and submissive. "Alright. You win. How's ... how's this for a

gesture? Jim Potter has an invisibility cloak. A good one. In fact, I'm pretty sure, it's a Potter family heirloom. Just don't say anything to Theo's father over Easter break. Please. I'll get the cloak and give it to you when you come back. I'll even present it to you in the Common Room in front of everyone when you return. Just ... just don't do anything to get Theo hurt, okay?"

Draco smiled. Then, he actually reached up and patted Harry on the cheek, as if he were a small child. "Of course not, Potter. You have that cloak for me when I get back, and I'll make sure your little friend doesn't get spanked too hard by his father this summer." Then, he snickered cruelly and left the room, Crabbe and Goyle following close behind. Harry watched them as they left and continued to stare at the door after it closed.

"Harry!" said Theo after they were gone. "Have you gone mad? If you steal a family heirloom and give it to Malfoy, you'll lose your Heir status for sure! And it'll be for nothing, because Malfoy will probably rat me out to Father anyway!"

"More importantly," said Blaise dryly. "You've completely ruined my social standing. I thought I was picking the winner with you, Potter. Instead, you just roll over to that little ponce at the first real threat?"

Harry continued to stare at the door. "Roll. Over." He said the words slowly, rolling them around in his mouth as if they were foreign and alien. "Roooooll. Oooveer."

Then, he turned to face Blaise with an amused look on his face. "Is that really what you think just happened, Blaise? My acting must be pretty good if I fooled even you." He turned his burning gaze back to the door. "In just a few hours, Malfoy is leaving for Easter break. That's six days

he'll be away from the castle. Six days beyond my reach. So, naturally, I *pretended* to roll over and then promised him a gift suitable for his ego to ensure that he keeps his mouth shut until he gets back."

Blaise relaxed a bit at Harry's words. "So, you've got a plan?"

"No," said Harry casually, while still staring at the door, "but I *do* have six days. God made the World in six days. Surely, I can come up with a plan for dealing with Little Lord Bad-Faith in that amount of time. And on the seventh day, we'll rest. And Draco Malfoy will never trouble us again."

Blaise and Theo both looked wide-eyed at Harry for a second and then turned to look at each other somewhat nervously. Neither of them spoke, as they were both afraid to broach the topic of whether or not it was a good thing for Harry Potter to compare himself to God.

Chapter End Notes

AN 1: The books say there is an Easter Break, but doesn't say when it is, so I arbitrarily said students leave the day before Holy Wednesday and return on Easter Monday, mainly because it lets me use that "six days" line.

Slytherin Maneuvers Pt 2

CHAPTER 26: Slytherin Maneuvers (Pt. 2)

The majority of the student body left for the Hogsmeade train station that afternoon around one o'clock. Just after five, Harry sent Hermione a message via their enchanted parchments, apologizing for their earlier argument and asking that she and Neville bring Jim and Ron to meet with him as he had some new information about "Hagrid's little problem" as well as an idea for solving it that was better than Ron's proposal. She accepted the apology graciously, and just after dinner, Hermione and Neville physically dragged the obviously reluctant Jim and Ron into an empty classroom near the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. Harry was already waiting, sitting on the teacher's desk while twirling his wand absently.

Jim's face darkened angrily as soon as he saw Harry. "No. No way. We are not involving the snake. We don't need him."

"Oh, yes, you do, Little Brother. You do indeed." Harry jumped off the desk. "Because *your* plan has already failed. Draco Malfoy knows about the dragon *and* your plan for smuggling it away from Hogwarts. The only reason he hasn't tattled already is that he wants to catch you in the act, as dragon smuggling, as I've already informed Hermione and Neville, is a much more serious crime than mere dragon breeding."

The Gryffindors all looked horrified at Harry's news. "How did Malfoy find out?" Hermione asked anxiously.

Harry shrugged. There was a small part of him that felt bad about how easy it was to lie to his best friends in order to get them to abandon Ron's foolish scheme. He consoled himself with the knowledge that he was also lying to Jim Potter and for a good cause to boot.

"No idea. I only know because he's an arrogant braggart and I overheard him gloating to Crabbe and Goyle. If you proceed with Ron's plan, then Hagrid and all of Charlie Weasley's friends from the dragon sanctuary will probably be arrested for dragon smuggling, and any of you who are discovered to be involved will risk expulsion. At the very least, you will suffer a catastrophic loss of House points, and I can't even imagine what sorts of fiendish detentions you'll get over it."

The four Gryffindors looked at one another unhappily. Finally, Jim spoke. "And you've got an alternative plan?"

"Yes. One that deals with the dragon problem without risk to anyone involved including the dragon itself. It's not illegal. It's not even unethical. Who knows - someone might even get House points out of it."

"Okay, so what's the plan?" Jim asked.

Harry folded his arms. "No," he said simply. "As you have reminded me repeatedly this year, I am a slimy Slytherin snake, and you don't get the benefits of my slimy Slytherin snakiness for free. I want something, something only you can give me."

"What is it?" Jim asked angrily.

"The cloak," said Harry. Then, he put up his hand as Jim's face quickly started to turn purple. "*Not* permanently. I only

want to borrow it over the Easter break. I'll return it next Monday."

"No! Absolutely not!" Jim exclaimed.

"Harry!" Hermione interjected sharply, as if offended that the Slytherin would demand something in exchange for his help.

"What, Hermione?" he asked in obvious annoyance. "Is it wrong for me to ask for the temporary use of a Potter family heirloom in exchange for my help, but acceptable for Jim to selfishly refuse even though it's *his* friend we're saving?"

Then, he turned from her to address the other Lions. "Are you all that afraid of the awful threat posed by an invisible Slytherin? Would it help if I promised that while I have it I won't do anything illegal or criminal or even against school rules? If I promise that I won't use it against the Gryffindors or the other Houses? If I promise that I won't even use it outside the Slytherin dorms because I only need it to deal with an internal House matter? Because all of those things are true."

"What kind of internal House matter?" asked Jim suspiciously.

Harry glared at him. "One that should not be discussed with outsiders, Jim. Hence the word 'internal.' If you absolutely must know, it has to do with that same subject matter we discussed last Christmas. Beyond that, I can't say. So do we have a deal or not?"

Jim returned his glare and then looked pensive. If by *subject matter* Harry meant Theo Nott, then it probably meant the other boy was in trouble, and Harry needed the cloak to protect him. "You promise to return it Monday?"

"I would swear on my family name and the honor of Slytherin House, but somehow I don't think you would take either of those seriously. But yes, I do promise to return it completely intact and undamaged on Monday."

After hesitating for some time, Jim signed in resignation. "Okay, I'll trust you ... but only for Hagrid's sake. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Jim left the room, leaving Ron, Hermione and Neville behind. Ron was openly disgusted by Harry, while Hermione seemed angry with him for having the temerity to demand something in exchange for his help. Harry resisted the temptation to ask her how many dental patients her parents treated for free. For his part, Neville didn't seem angry with him, merely somewhat disappointed.

Minutes later, Jim returned with his book bag, pulled the cloak out of it, and handed it over to his brother who folded it neatly and placed it into his own bag.

"Okay," said Jim. "What's your brilliant plan?"

"Well, it seems to me that the biggest problem for Hagrid – aside from the inherent silliness of raising a fire-breathing dragon in a wooden hut – is that he's acting without the legal right to either breed or raise a Class XXXXX creature. Luckily, there *is* someone around here who holds a Ministry license for both those things – namely, the school's Care of Magical Creatures instructor."

"Kettleburn!" exclaimed Hermione.

"*Professor* Kettleburn, Hermione," said Harry smugly. "Who, as it happens, worked for several years at a dragon sanctuary in Canada prior to coming to Hogwarts."

"That's it?!" said Jim angrily. "That's you're brilliant Slytherin plan? You want us to just tell a teacher?!"

"I don't want *you* to do anything at all, Little Brother. *I've* already done it. I spoke to Professor Kettleburn this afternoon just after lunch."

The Gryffindors stared at Harry, shocked.

"You scumbag!" yelled Ron finally. "I can't believe you just ratted Hagrid out like that!"

Harry laughed. "Actually, Weasel, I didn't even get *the chance* to rat Hagrid out. I got as far as asking to speak with Kettleburn in confidence and telling him that, hypothetically, I might know of someone who had acquired a dragon egg without understanding the legal issues that might result. At that point, he interrupted me to say, and I quote – '*Oh Sweet Morgana's tits, what has Hagrid done now?!*' – unquote. In other words, Hermione, I was completely correct this morning. This is actually something Hagrid does *routinely* and the staff just continually bails him out. Though to be honest, even Kettleburn was astonished he got hold of something like a Norwegian Ridgeback egg."

"Anyway," he continued, "Kettleburn said not to worry and that he'd take care of it. He has some friends in the Ministry who will backdate an authorization form allowing him to incubate a dragon egg that's been donated to the school until it hatches and then to raise it for a few months until it is old enough to be safely transported via apparation. Apparently, there's an 'educational purposes' exception to the normal rules on dragon-breeding. In a day or so, once the paperwork is complete, Kettleburn will take custody of the egg from Hagrid, who will still be allowed to assist the

Professor and the NEWT-level CoMC students through the rest of the hatching process and then with raising it until after exams. Then, they will ship it to the sanctuary in Romania through perfectly standard and legal procedures sometime this summer."

He slung his book bag over his shoulder and headed for the door. "Oh, and I also won five points for Slytherin for bringing this to his attention and handling the matter with such discretion."

"Hang on a minute!" said Hermione angrily. He stopped and looked back at her with a bland expression. "You met with him this afternoon? That means you already had this whole situation resolved before you even contacted me!"

"Naturally. It would have been quite embarrassing to have presented a plan as simple as 'talk to a teacher' and it not actually work."

"So what would have happened if I refused to let you borrow the invisibility cloak?" Jim asked testily.

Harry looked thoughtful. "I suppose I would have done a good deed and helped Hagrid out of a very serious jam and then gotten nothing in exchange except a few House points and the satisfaction of knowing that I was a better person than the Boy-Who-Lived." And then, he turned and walked out, leaving four speechless Gryffindors behind him.

15 April 1992

The next day, Hermione watched the door of the Great Hall impatiently, but Harry never showed up for breakfast. She had sent him several parchment messages, but he never responded. By lunch, there was still no sign of him, though Ron would flinch every time he felt a breeze, convinced that

Harry was sneaking up behind him invisibly for some nefarious purpose. Jim was not as paranoid, but he was continually anxious. Part of him was terrified that he'd lost forever the precious heirloom his father had entrusted to him. That afternoon, Hermione sent yet another parchment message while studying in the Gryffindor common room but then jumped when her parchment finally dinged in response. The message, however, was not one she was expecting.

*"Um, Hi, Hermione, this is Theo. Harry asked me to tell you that he's ... oh, damn, how did he put it... off doing sneaky, underhanded unethical things that he can't talk to you about and that you'd just disapprove of because '**Gryffindor!**' And also, he, um, has too much going on right now to worry about continually feeling like he's being judged for his lack of all-true-ism. No, I said altruism! ... Merlin, this thing really needs some kind of edit function. Anyway, just between us, I think you hurt his feelings last night. Well, you and Neville, but mainly you. No offense. Sorry. He just says he doesn't want to talk about it while he's ... doing important Slytherin ... stuff... that he can't share with you because, once again ... '**Gryffindor!**'. Anyway, he'll see you next Tuesday after he's ... done with ... stuff. Now how do you send the bloody message again?..."*

Both concerned and chagrined, Hermione showed the parchment to Neville who just shrugged.

"What do you think it means? And why is Harry avoiding us?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know, Hermione," Neville said somewhat dejectedly. "Maybe because he was one-hundred percent right about how to handle the dragon, and we completely

ignored his advice because it wasn't exciting enough? Maybe because he probably has the same right to use that cloak as Jim and the fact that he has to use trickery to get it is a reminder of how badly his parents treat him? Maybe because we sometimes take way too much pride in being the House of Brash Heroism and act like we're superior to the House of Cunning Pragmatism even when they get the job done better than us?"

Hermione looked down for a few seconds. "It's so strange. I'm as close to Harry as I am anyone else in this school, but at the end of the day, Gryffindors and Slytherins are just ... different, aren't we?"

He nodded. "Yes, we are. I don't think we have to be enemies like Jim and Ron – and Draco, I guess – all believe. But we really do have different ways of thinking about things." Then, he smiled with mild embarrassment. "You know ... I actually felt a bit ... disappointed in Harry for making a demand of Jim in exchange for helping him, even though I wouldn't have thought twice about any other Slytherin doing the same, not even if they asked for a lot more than Harry did. Honestly, I wouldn't have thought it out of character for a *Ravenclaw* to have asked for something in exchange for his help. I guess it is kind of unfair of us to expect Harry to act like he's a Gryffindor just because he's our friend. He's always going to be a Slytherin, so he's always going to have an angle, especially where the Potters are concerned."

"And yet ... he actually did help Hagrid, and more effectively than any of us could have, *before* he made his demands."

"Yeah, that's our Harry. He's the most Gryffindorish Slytherin I know of."

"So should we be worried that he's now avoiding his Gryffindor friends for ... Slytherin stuff?"

Neville frowned. "Let me see that parchment. By the way, I really need to get one of these. Can you link multiple parchments?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on it," she said as she handed the paper over and explained how it worked.

Seconds later, in the Prince's Lair, the mate to Hermione's parchment dinged softly, and Theo picked it up and read it aloud.

"Theo, it's Neville here. Please remind Harry that he can always call on me if he needs me for absolutely anything. And especially anything to do with what we talked about by the lake that afternoon when I came back after Halloween."

Harry looked up from the stack of ancient texts he was perusing as he considered Neville's message. Then, he turned to Theo, who sat on the opposite side of the ancient mahogany table, picking at a chocolate frog. "Tell him... Tell him this exactly: *'Things are a bit shady, but there's no real darkness so far. And thanks.'*"

Theo crooked an eyebrow at the cryptic message and then relayed it as Harry wished.

18 April 1991

Rodney Montague angrily yanked open the door to his room and stepped out into the Prefect's Row, clad in nothing but an undershirt and black boxer shorts adorned with little green and silver snakes. It was the third night in a row that the Seventh Year Prefect had been awoken after midnight by what sounded like shifting gears and crumbling masonry

just outside his door. And for the third night in a row, there was no sign of the source of the noise. Shaking his head in frustration, Rodney closed his door and returned to bed. He just hoped that he wouldn't be woken up again later by that godawful hissing sound that had recently started up at random intervals from some leaky pipes somewhere on the other side of his bedroom wall.

21 April 1992

Just before dawn on the last day of Easter Break, Blaise Zabini, whose mother had trained him to be a light sleeper, awoke to the soft sounds of the door opening and closing by itself. A few seconds later, Harry Potter materialized out of thin air, tossing the Potter invisibility cloak onto his bed. He looked as though he'd barely slept for days. This was probably because he'd barely slept for days.

"Well?" asked Blaise. "Are we good to go?" His voice woke Theo, who was also a light sleeper for different family-related reasons. The two boys sat up in their respective beds to get a better look at their friend as he shucked his outer clothes and fell onto his bed without even changing into pajamas.

"They went for it," he said through a haze of sleep deprivation. "The vote was 4-2 with one abstention, which was closer than I'd have liked, but it was enough. We'll do it tonight after dinner. Wake me before lunch, please. I have some errands to take care of this afternoon before ... Malfoy ... returns..." His voice grew faint, but Blaise had one more question.

"And you're sure you don't want us in there with you?"

"Mmmmm. No – *yawn* – you two jus' stay out in ... Common Room ... observe reactions. Besides, might get – *yaaaaawn* –

a lil' scary in there. I need to project total ... poise 'n confidence 'n stuff. Ruin effect if either of you gets ... jumpy ..."

Blaise scowled at the insinuation that he lacked poise and prepared a retort, when Theo interrupted him. "Let him sleep. Besides, he's right. You haven't been in there when they're all ... agitated." Theo shuddered visibly, and Blaise realized his friend probably had a point. Across the room, Harry started snoring softly.

Later that afternoon, as Jim was leaving the Great Hall, he saw Harry headed his way. He started to call out, but Harry glared and shook his head, and Jim's mouth snapped shut, as he was at this point terrified of doing anything to provoke his brother until he had the cloak back in his possession. Without saying a word, Harry walked past him, and at the last possible second, he smoothly pulled a small wrapped parcel out of his robe and passed it to Jim without slowing down, before proceeding on down the hallway. Jim looked back at his brother in confusion and then examined the package. As he turned it over, he saw a note with Harry's neat handwriting.

*"For pity's sake, open it in your room!
Don't stand around gawking at it in front of people like an imbecile!"*

Jim blushed slightly and tucked the package away within his own robes. Then, he walked as quickly as propriety allowed back to Gryffindor Tower, barely resisting the impulse to run in the halls. Once inside, he abandoned all restraint and sprinted up to the currently empty First Year dorm room. He sat down on his bed, and, with trembling hands, he carefully opened the package and pulled out the shimmering fabric of his family's ancestral invisibility cloak.

Shimmering fabric which was now a **VIVID**
SLYTHERIN GREEN. And as he spread the cloak out, Jim began to hyperventilate as he read the four-inch-wide silver lettering that had been embroidered on the back, relaying a proud message now permanently engraved onto his father's most prized possession:

**"SLYTHERINS RULE.
GRYFFINDORS DROOL."**

Jim screamed in murderous fury. *"I'LL KILL HIM!"* Then, he jumped up from his bed and ran to the door, enraged at his treacherous sibling. As he opened it, however, he nearly ran straight into Neville Longbottom, who looked at his fellow Gryffindor with concern.

"Whoa! Jim?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

Jim Potter just snarled at the other boy who he knew was friends with Harry. "Like you care, *Longbottom!*"

Neville rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Forget I asked. Anyway, Harry just asked me to deliver this to you." He held out a wrapped package to the other boy. It looked nearly identical to the one Jim had just opened save that it had no writing on it. Jim was paralyzed for several seconds, his mouth opening and closing like a fish, as he made a strange gurgling sound in the back of his throat. Then, he snatched the package out of Neville's grasp and tore it open. His hands, which had been trembling before, were now practically shaking. Inside the package was the true cloak, looking exactly as it did the night he lent it to Harry. Jim clutched the cloak to his chest as if he would never let it go again.

Neville eyed him suspiciously. "You really need to learn to calm down and not get so overexcited, Jim. I hear

meditation is good for that." Then, he turned and left, shaking his head as he did. Jim ignored him and practically staggered back away from the door to fall onto his bed. After a moment or two, he looked over and noticed that there was now just a piece of parchment laying on the bed where he'd dropped the false green cloak. On the paper, there was a large smiley-face with a winking eye. Jim stared at the parchment as his frantic heart beat finally slowed to a safer rate.

"MY BROTHER IS A *BLOODY PSYCHOTIC!*" he finally bellowed to the empty room.

Who Is the Prince of Slytherin?

CHAPTER 27: Who Is the Prince of Slytherin?

At dinner that night, Harry and his two Slytherin friends sat on the far end of the dinner table away from Malfoy and his cronies. The two made eye contact at one point, with Draco crooking an eyebrow inquiringly at his defeated rival. Harry looked at him with a beaten expression and mouthed the words "*after dinner*" to him. Draco nodded smugly and went back to talking with his friends. Harry, Theo and Blaise ate quietly. They didn't talk to one another. They'd already said everything they needed to say.

An hour later, the trio were standing together in a corner of the Common Room. Harry scanned the room, which was fairly crowded as the returning Slytherins talked about school work or what they'd done during their week-long break or what broom closets they'd be meeting in for after-curfew hookups. On one of the nearby sofas, Rodney Montague was engaged in some intense conversation with his fellow Seventh Year Prefect, Olivia Kolumbiko, an attractive dark-skinned girl whose family hailed from South Africa but who could trace her Pureblood ancestry back nearly three centuries. The two seemed to be debating some arcane point about Arithmancy relevant to their upcoming NEWTS. On the far side of the room, Marcus Flint held court over the Quidditch team as they discussed new plays for their upcoming match with Hufflepuff. Finally, Draco entered the Common Room triumphantly along with Crabbe and Goyle.

"Here they come," said Theo quietly.

"Alright then," replied Harry. "Time to put on a show."

The two groups of First Years met near the middle of the Common Room.

"Well, Potter? Did you get that cloak for me? I'm looking forward to trying it out."

"Actually, Malfoy," said Harry amiably. "I *had* the cloak. Theo and Blaise will back me up – they've both seen it. But after having a week to think things through, I reconsidered and returned it to the Git. You see, I've decided that rather than give in to your petty blackmail, it would be more effective and practical and, honestly, more fun to simply *crush you*." He took a step closer to the boy, whose bodyguards tensed. "Like a bug. *Under. My. Foot*." And then, before Draco could say anything in response, Harry turned aside from him and moved to the center of the room.

"*Ladies and gentle-wizards of Slytherin House!*" Harry said loudly and confidently. "May I have your attention please?" The assembled Slytherins, who made up almost half of the house, grew quiet and attentive if somewhat bemused at the little firstie's presumption. "Thank you. As some of you are no doubt aware, there has been conflict within the First Year Slytherin class between myself and Draco Malfoy and our respective associates. Last Tuesday, just before the Break started, that disagreement boiled over into physical violence here in this very Common Room, and speaking for myself, I apologize for my role in such a vulgar display."

"Now as I see it," he continued, "this conflict between Mr. Malfoy and myself arises from his belief – about which he has droned *on and on for months* – that because of my lineage, my connection to the Boy-Who-Lived, and my general views on certain political issues, I am unworthy to hold a place within Slytherin House. Well, I have something to say in response to that. Indeed, what I have to say will, I

think, prove my right to a place in this House rather conclusively." He paused then, and his winning smile suddenly became rather cold. "*In fact*, and without intending disrespect to anyone here, what I have to say may well prove that I'm more fit to be a Slytherin than, well, nearly every Slytherin currently residing in this castle."

Some in the crowd, especially the most staunchly Pureblood upperclassmen, started to mutter darkly at that, but Harry continued as if unconcerned. "Unfortunately, what I have to say also concerns somewhat delicate matters that I don't think should be bandied about the Common Room for everyone to hear. Unlike Mr. Malfoy, I believe that discretion and subtlety are important, if underestimated, Slytherin values. So, when I speak my piece, I will do so in a place of privacy and only in front of a small group of respected House members. With that in mind, I would ask that Mr. Rodney Montague, Miss Olivia Kolumbiko and Mr. Marcus Flint accompany Mr. Malfoy and myself so that we can continue this discussion," Harry hesitated for just a second, "*in the conference room*." And with that, Harry turned on his heels and headed towards Prefect's Row.

Behind him, the assembled Slytherins began talking in confusion (and for some, in outrage) until Marcus Flint loudly called out, "Hang on! What conference room?!"

Harry stopped at the corridor entrance and looked back at him. "The one at the end of Prefect's Row, of course." Then, he turned and continued on down the hall.

Flint's brow furrowed in confusion. "There's no conference room at the end of Prefect's Row!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes there is," Harry's voice loudly echoed down the corridor. "A big one, too!"

Now even more confused, Flint looked over to the Seventh Year Prefects ... and did a double-take. Marcus had *heard* the expression "the blood drained from his face," but he'd never actually *seen* it before. But at the moment, Rodney Montague honestly looked so pale he might as well have been drained by a vampire. For her part, Olivia looked little better as the two prefects slowly stood. Marcus moved towards them (past an utterly perplexed Draco Malfoy) in time to hear a shaken Olivia ask "Could it possibly be true, Rodney?"

Suddenly, Montague turned and practically ran towards Prefect's Row, emitting a trail of vulgarities that Marcus wouldn't have guessed the priggish Seventh Year even knew.

"Marcus, take Malfoy and follow Rodney," said Olivia firmly. Then, she turned and loudly addressed the rest of the confused Slytherins. "Everyone else, stay here! All other prefects, you will guard the entrance to Prefect's Row. **No one** is to enter until we return! If I catch anyone even looking down that hallway – including younger prefects – you can expect to be hexed so hard, they'll have to carry you to Madam Pomfrey in a bucket!" And with that, the young witch pulled her wand and followed the others down the hall.

As the room broke out into excited chatter, Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other and then towards Zabini and Nott. "Um, what's going on?" Goyle asked Harry's two friends.

"Your boss sowed the wind," said Theo calmly. "This might take a while. You guys know how to play Exploding Snap?" Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other again, shrugged, and started looking around for an open table.

Meanwhile, Olivia, Marcus and Draco had come to a stop behind Rodney, who was standing in front of an inky black portal where a brick wall used to be. "Okay," said Marcus, uneasily, "*that's* never been there before!"

"Olivia," said Rodney in a shaky voice, "this looks *exactly* the way they described the entrance to us. Does this mean ...?"

"I don't know, Rodney," she said quietly.

"But if it *is*, does that mean that Potter is ... you know?"

"*I don't know*, Rodney," she said again.

"What is all this? Some trick of Potter's?" said Draco irritably.

"Be quiet, Malfoy," Olivia said as she studied the door.

"Don't talk to me like that! My father – OWW!"

"Can it, sprog!" said Marcus angrily, after cuffing Malfoy hard on the back of his head.

Rodney and Olivia looked at each other and nodded before entering the passageway together with their wands drawn. Marcus and Draco followed. Once inside, Marcus was so impressed he didn't notice the soft grind of the door closing behind him. This was *definitely* a conference room, albeit an unusual one. There was even a conference table, flanked on either side by fancy chairs with brass snake-head finials. But at the head of the table, there wasn't a chair.

There was a throne.

To be more precise, there was a massive black throne that looked to be carved out of a solid block of basalt inlaid with

silver filigree and with thick green silk cushions to provide comfort. But the most impressive – and intimidating – thing about this throne was what sprang out from its back: a number of truly massive silver snake sculptures, each with huge emeralds for eyes. By far the dominant one was the silver basilisk in the center that curved over the throne almost protectively. Its body was as wide as a tree trunk, and it loomed at least fifteen-feet tall with emerald eyes the size of a man's fist. Flanking it were a python and a king cobra that were almost as tall if not so wide. On the right side of the throne (from Marcus's perspective) were three smaller but still over-sized snakes – representations of an ashwinder, a boomslang, and finally a blue krait, though this one was, of course, silver. On the left side was a large runespoor with three heads growing out of a single over-sized trunk. The whole thing looked like something out of antiquity or myth, the throne of some ancient pagan serpentine god-king.

And currently sitting on the throne - as if born to it - was Harry Potter.

"Thank you all for coming," he said reasonably. "Please take a seat."

Rodney pointed his wand towards Harry. "Get out of that chair," he growled in a mixture of rage and fear.

Harry leaned forward with an innocent expression on his face. "Why, Rodney? Is ... is this *your* chair?"

"Dammit Potter...!" exclaimed Rodney. His wand hand was shaking and there were beads of sweat on his brow.

"Nah!" said Harry cheerfully. "I don't think this is your chair at all, Rodney. Nor yours, Olivia. Though, like every Seventh Year Prefect before you, I know you've been *told* by your

predecessors about this chair ... and this room ... and what it probably means that I'm sitting here right now." He leaned back and turned his gaze to the other two Slytherins who were looking around the Lair in wonder. "Marcus? Draco? From the looks you're giving, I'll wager that neither of you know anything at all about this chair. Which is rather sad in your case, Draco. You see, not too long ago, your father sat where I'm sitting now. Lucius Malfoy claimed this seat when he was a student. His name is on one of those silver placards mounted over there on the wall." He pointed towards the next to last nameplate. "*'Lucius Malfoy. 1970-1972.'* But, I'm sorry to say that, no, this will never be your chair either."

Harry ignored Draco's look of confused petulance and addressed the whole group, raising his arms out to gesture around him. "This... is the Hydra Throne. It was crafted by Salazar Slytherin himself before he left Hogwarts to provide guidance to future generations of Slytherin students. This seat is reserved for the student who claims the mantle of ... the Prince of Slytherin."

"And that's you?" asked Rodney disbelievingly. Olivia had gently put her hand on his wand arm, which he slowly lowered.

Harry burst into laughter. "No, of course not! Don't be silly, Rodney! An eleven-year-old Prince? That would be laughable! Mind you, I do *plan* to be the Prince of Slytherin, but I have years to go before I satisfy the requirements of the position. No, I'm just sitting here now because, well, I guess you could say I have special permission for one night only. A dispensation, so to speak. Which is a good thing, since the throne is perfectly capable of killing people who sit here *without* permission. Now, as I said out in the

Common Room, I have something important to say, but it's something I want kept quiet which is why we're here."

"You see," he continued, "there are reasons almost no one knows about this room or this chair or the whole 'Prince of Slytherin' deal. One reason is that the Prince himself is not someone who struts around bragging about his status. Or hers, for that matter – nearly half the Princes have been female. The Prince rules from the shadows, quietly shaping and guiding the House according to Salazar's vision instead of bullying others around like a spoiled child, an idea that is clearly beyond your comprehension, Draco. But the most important reason for the Prince's secrecy is, naturally, magic."

Harry gestured around the room. "This room – the Prince's Lair – carries a powerful enchantment, one that has preserved its secrets for eleven centuries. While this chair is occupied, whether long term or just temporarily, a magical contract covers the doorway, binding anyone who enters to an oath of secrecy. After we leave here, we'll all be completely incapable of discussing anything that's said in here tonight without the express permission of the Prince himself. And since I'm the acting-Prince, if for one night only, I'm confident we'll all be keeping our secrets. Whatever is discussed at this table, you won't be able to repeat to anyone else or even write down. You can't be made to reveal anything under Veritaserum or even the Imperius. And if a Legilimens tries to read you, all he'll find is inky blackness and silence where any memories about this room should be. All of which means I can say my piece without fear of gossip, and then, once you're satisfied with my Slytherin bona fides, we can move on to resolving my little conflict with Draco."

Draco made a face at Harry's familiarity, but inside, he was exceedingly nervous. He had never heard about this room or about any "*Prince of Slytherin*" and certainly didn't know that it was a title his own father had once held. Worse, he had the increasingly disturbing feeling that by pushing Harry Potter too far, he had unleashed something quite beyond his control. Something dangerous, perhaps even terrible. Following the lead of the older Slytherins, Draco sat down in one of the chairs nearest the door, opposite Flint. The two prefects sat on either side of the table in the middle chairs, leaving an open chair on either side of Potter. As they sat, Harry smiled warmly at them all, but Draco could see malice in those green eyes, and he shuddered slightly as he remembered Harry's promise to crush him like a bug.

"Alright, firstie," said Marcus somewhat irritably. He alone had absolutely no idea what was going on which, at the moment, put him in the odd position of being the one person in the room not afraid of Harry Potter. "We're here. What's so important that you have to say to us?"

Harry's smile actually broke out into a broad grin as he chuckled softly. "I am sorry, Marcus. I was a bit unclear. I said I had something to say that would prove my worthiness as a Slytherin. I never meant to imply that I would be speaking *to any of you*."

And then ... ***Harry Potter HISSED!***

The other four had barely a fraction of a second to process the fact that "*Harry Potter, Heir to House Potter and Brother of the Boy-Who-Lived is a bloody Parselmouth!*" when they were all startled by the movement and sounds which erupted all around them. Each of the six-inch brass adder-head finials on the chairs instantly

stretched into three-foot-long writhing brass adders which then twisted themselves around and extended their fangs just a foot or so away each Slytherin's head. Simultaneously, each of the silver snakes attached to the throne also came to life, writhing and hissing at the group. The great basilisk in the center bent down to look directly at Olivia who screamed in mortal terror for nearly eight seconds before she finally realized that it wasn't a real basilisk and its gaze wasn't fatal. It was another ten seconds before the rest of the screams died down into a general hysterical mumbling and hyperventilation so that Harry could finally speak.

"So," he said easily, "do I have everyone's attention?"

After a few more seconds of looking around in panic, the four Slytherins all slowly nodded. Rodney was the first to speak.

"You ... you're a ... Parseltongue?"

"No, Rodney, I'm a *Parselmouth*," Harry said. "Parseltongue is the language. Parselmouth is the person who speaks it. It's a common mistake. It took me a while to get it straight myself."

"But ... you're a Potter! Potters hate Slytherins! It's been that way for at least two hundred years!"

"Really? I had no idea it went back *that* far. I do know my birth-father has an irrational hatred of Slytherins. He sent me a lovely note about it the day after my Sorting. As I recall, you were all there when it exploded. But fortunately, James Potter didn't raise me, and so I haven't absorbed any of his ancestral bigotries. The general topic of Parseltongue came up when we were visiting Diagon Alley last summer, and he mentioned his belief that being a Parselmouth is a sign of being a dark wizard, which is ignorant nonsense, but

I thought it best to humor him and not reveal I had the talent. Of course, out there in the Muggle world, I can only talk to actual snakes, but Hogwarts is so permeated with magic that nearly everything that even looks like a snake is susceptible to Parseltongue." He looked around at all the snakes that surrounded him. "As you have no doubt noticed."

"Is Jim a Parselmouth?" asked Marcus.

Harry perked up in amusement and considered the matter. "That's a *very* insightful question, Marcus. I can see why the ashwinder likes you. Honestly, I've no idea. Circumstances have never contrived to put me and Jim together in a room that had a snake in it. I wouldn't be surprised if he were, since he's my twin and all. Of course, my birth-father's views on Parseltongue are hardly a secret, so I expect if Jim does have the gift, he's concealed it. Or maybe he's just never gotten close enough to a snake because of a childish belief that they're all slimy and evil." Harry snorted. "Wouldn't it be hilarious if the Boy-Who-Lived were a Parselmouth, and it got publicly revealed? James would have a stroke. I'll have to look into arranging that."

"Anyway," he continued. "It is true that no descendent of Salazar Slytherin has ever married into the Potter family. Which means that I could only have inherited this gift - and it *is* exclusive to descendants of Salazar Slytherin - from my mother's side."

"But, your mother's a Mud..." the adders on either side of Draco's head hissed loudly, "that is, a Muggleborn. How can she be descended from Salazar Slytherin?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, presumably, reports of her Muggleborn status are somewhat overstated. Let's just say

I've been exploring her family tree for a while and expect to have some answers by the end of this summer. Next question?"

Olivia looked at him speculatively while trying to ignore the basilisk that loomed over his head. "If you're not the Prince of Slytherin, who is?"

"As I said, there's not one at the moment. To become the Prince, you have to be a student who's gained the approval of all seven of the serpents who comprise the Hydra Throne, each of whom represents a different characteristic that the Founder considered important for his students."

Harry pointed up at the basilisk looming over him. "The big guy, Rajah, represents ambition, although he prefers to think of it as '*vision*.' For him, it's not enough to be personally ambitious, like wanting to get rich or famous. You need an ambition to shape the whole world to your will in some way. To Rajah's right is the python, Jormangand, named after the snake that encircled the world. He represents political acumen and the ability to form winning coalitions. For example, he is very supportive of my membership in an inter-house study group but is otherwise appalled at how insular the rest of the House has become over the last few decades. To Rajah's left is Ka the Cobra, who represents the Slytherin respect for intellect and academic excellence. Moving on down from him, we have Mara the Ashwinder, who represents cunning and cleverness. Next is Delilah the Boomslang, who represents the values of charm and subtlety which, as I've said, are greatly undervalued in the House nowadays."

He paused and looked over towards the boomslang. "In all honesty, I have to say Delilah's my favorite. She's a cutie." The boomslang twisted her body around until her head was near to Harry's. He hissed at her softly and then tickled

under her chin, causing the silver snake to make a soft "ki-ki-ki" sound which the terrified Slytherin students all realized was the sound of a snake's laughter. Harry turned back to the group, focusing a suddenly grim expression towards Draco. "On the far right is the krait, Nidhogg, who represents ruthlessness," he said without elaboration. Draco swallowed. He suddenly noticed that the krait was staring at him intently and had been doing so for some time.

"Last but not least, on the opposite side, we have the runespoor, whose three heads are called Tisiphone, Megaera and Alecto. They collectively represent respect for wizarding traditions, which, I should point out, is *not* synonymous with blood purity."

"That's a lie!" exclaimed Draco despite the angry hissing of the brass adders. "Salazar Slytherin wanted to purge the school of Mudbloods!"

Harry sighed, and then flicked his wand lazily towards a bookshelf. ***"ACCIO SLYTHERIN MEMOIRS VOLUMES 1, 2 and 3."***

And with that, three large leather bound volumes flew off the shelf and landed on the table with a thud. "The long forgotten truth, Draco, is that Salazar Slytherin was opposed to Muggleborns attending Hogwarts, but not because they were inferior. It was because he thought they would be at an unfair disadvantage compared to the wizard-raised students. In the days of Hogwarts' founding, a Muggleborn most likely came from peasant stock, which meant he was illiterate, innumerate, highly superstitious, and probably never bathed. Salazar believed that Muggleborns should be removed from Muggle society as soon as their magic manifested and inducted into a special

preparatory school so that they could be elevated to the same intellectual and cultural level as wizarding children and integrated fully into magical society before being allowed into Hogwarts. For a variety of political and ethical reasons, his idea was shot down by the other Founders as well as the wizarding government that existed at the time, and so Salazar grudgingly accepted the presence of Muggleborn peasant wizards and witches who were mainstreamed straight into the school. And despite his reservations, there were a small number of Muggleborns Sorted into Slytherin during his tenure, many of whom earned his respect for how hard they worked to fulfill their ambitions and assimilate into magical society. It has only been within the last three or four centuries that the House has become so hostile to Muggleborns that almost none of them are ever Sorted here."

"Oh, and before we get too far afield, no, there was never a big fight between him and Godric Gryffindor that led to him leaving Hogwarts in anger. His wife contracted dragon pox and had a very difficult recovery, and he took both her and their minor children back to his ancestral home in Spain for the warmer climate, remaining there for the rest of his life. Gryffindor himself actually died of natural causes several years before Slytherin's departure, an event that he wrote of with great sadness and regret. The final volume of his memoirs, however, contains reference to his continued friendly correspondence with the other two Founders over a twenty-year span between his departure and his eventual death. Anything you've heard about the man to the contrary is just propaganda spread by blood purists who came along centuries later. Next?"

"Does all that stuff you just said mean that you don't support the Dark Lord?" asked Marcus bluntly.

"I assume you're referring to the most recent Dark Lord, the one who got himself blown up by a baby eleven years ago, and the answer is, no, I don't. I may not like my Muggleborn mother very much, but she did give birth to me, and I'll be damned if I ever agree to a political philosophy which says I should have never been born! What's more, the Hydra *agrees* with me. Over the past century or so, it *has* appointed Princes who adhered to blood purity doctrines because it looked like blood purity extremists like Grindewald and later Voldemort," the other four gasped and flinched, "*oh, for the love of ...* okay, Grindewald and *You-Know-Who* were likely to win, and Slytherins generally support being on the winning team. But then, those two *lost* rather decisively, and having had many years to consider the matter, the Hydra's consensus view is that blood purism has, on the whole, been damaging to Slytherin House, which is all the Hydra really cares about. Nowadays, people who by temperament and philosophy *should* become Slytherins instead go under the Hat begging to go somewhere else because they don't want to be stuck for seven years with a bunch of violently bigoted terrorist sympathizers, far too many of whom show obvious signs of inbreeding. Instead, we've become like the dark mirror of Hufflepuff – we scoop up everyone who doesn't belong in any other House and is also *mean and prejudiced*."

There was a long pause as the Slytherins digested this. Finally, Olivia spoke. "Why did you bring us here?" she asked quietly.

Harry took a deep breath. "And now we come to the heart of the matter. Draco Malfoy came into this House expecting to be the child-tyrant of Slytherin whose every command must obeyed. I derailed him from that and he's been out to get me ever since. For the most part, he's only been

annoying, but last Tuesday, he directly threatened someone important to me. Theo Nott is my friend and ally and someone who I think will rise in time to become of great value to this House. But Theo's *father* is a psychopathic nutcase who should be in Azkaban and who's already gotten away with murdering Theo's mother right in front of him. And Malfoy basically told me that if I didn't do a good enough job of groveling before him, he'd tell Tiberius Nott that his son was hanging out with undesirables with the goal of getting Theo physically abused at best and murdered at worst. I found that ... unacceptable."

"And so, Olivia and Rodney," he continued, "I consulted with the Hydra for its advice. After several days of negotiation, the majority of serpents agreed that I could exercise limited authority as Prince tonight for the sole purpose of showing you two this room and allowing you access to some of the room's benefits in exchange for you helping me out with my Malfoy problem. In particular ..." He summoned another thick book from the shelves to land on next to Slytherin's memoirs. "This book is an auto-updating record of *every* question asked on *every* NEWTs exam over the last hundred years. It doesn't have the answers, but it does have references to where the answers can be found, as well as notations regarding questions which have been asked repeatedly and examples of spells and potions which, if demonstrated, confer extra points."

Olivia and Rodney looked at the book hungrily. "What do you want in exchange?" Rodney said.

"A way to keep Draco Malfoy from trying to hurt my friends. Permanently." Harry looked over towards Draco as if the boy were something he'd scrapped off a shoe.

"Because *I've* been working on the problem for the last week, and, frankly, the only solution I've been able to come

up with is *to simply kill the little shit!*" There was a brief shocked silence ... which was quickly broken by a soft "ki-ki-ki" from the krait who Harry had identified as Niddhogg, the exemplar of Slytherin ruthlessness.

Draco paled. "You wouldn't..."

"You directly threatened the life of someone on Team Harry, Draco." Harry interrupted in a voice like a razor. "If you completely ignored even the possibility of a lethal response, I submit that *you're* the one who doesn't belong in Slytherin. Niddhogg here had a lot of interesting suggestions, and between the two of us, we came up with at least four different ways to murder you before the end of term and get away with it. And once you leave this room, you won't even be able to tell a soul that I'm coming after you." He paused, as if to calm himself. "That said, I'm not ... eager to start a body count at the age of eleven, so at this point, I am open to any less drastic suggestions from my peers."

"An Unbreakable Vow," Rodney said instantly. "He'll swear never to directly or indirectly try to harm ... well, whoever you say."

"I will not swear an Unbreakable Vow!" said Draco in a fury.

"Then I will cast the Imperius Curse upon you and make it so that you *cannot* harm Potter or any of his associates," said Olivia coldly. "That, or I will kill you myself on his behalf."

"Olivia!" exclaimed Rodney in shock.

She just looked around the room, a smile on her face. "I knew of this place, Rodney, even before my predecessor told me of it. There have been stories passed down in my

family for generations, but I had given up hope that I would ever see it myself." She turned to Harry. "I have an ancestor who sat on that throne as well."

He nodded. "Kristoff Kolumbiko, Class of 1756." He pointed over to the wall of silver placards. "Seventh column, third one down."

She looked where he pointed and smiled even wider. "Besides," she said, "it is as you said. Real Slytherins always pick the winning side. And from what I have seen tonight, Harry Potter, I think your ultimate victory is assured."

Marcus Flint slowly raised his hand, leery of the snakes on either side of him. "Uh, if this is about picking the brains of the Seventh Year Prefects, Potter, what am I doing here?"

"Well, I'd had an idea that as Quidditch captain, you could hold out the threat of keeping Draco off the team next year as a way to keep him in line. But mainly ... the Hydra asked me to bring you."

Marcus stared unblinkingly. "Hubuwhuh?"

Harry pointed again towards the placards of past Princes. "There are four people named Flint up on that wall, Marcus, though none since the 1870's. One Chief Warlock, one esteemed Hogwarts professor, one highly decorated auror ... and, well, one aspiring dark lord who died in Azkaban, but never mind her. The Hydra has had its eye on you for a while. It's the consensus of the serpents that you have tremendous potential that you're choosing to waste. They thought seeing this room might ... motivate you. And for what it's worth, Marcus, if I can be of any assistance in helping you, well, get on track, please don't hesitate to ask."

Flint blinked repeatedly and looked around the room again with new eyes. "Thanks, Potter, I mean, uh, Harry. I'll ... think about it."

Finally, everyone turned to stare at young Malfoy. The boy swallowed almost painfully as he looked back and forth among the pitiless faces of his four House-mates. He realized that he'd lost utterly, and so he moved on to what he might still salvage. "What would the Vow say?"

"Ki-ki-ki," laughed Niddhogg once more.

About forty minutes later, the five Slytherins exited Prefect's Row together, giving every appearance of having become great friends. Rodney announced to the Common Room (which was now jam-packed with nearly the *entire* Slytherin student body) that "Harry and Draco" had mended their fences and buried the hatchet and several other cliched idioms as well. In fact, Rodney, Olivia and Marcus *all* made a point of showing that they were on a first name basis with both boys, a highly unusual honor for two Slytherin firsties even if one of them was a Malfoy. Then, Draco made his way over to Theo Nott, apologized loudly and profusely for his "unconscionable behavior," and invited the other boy to come and stay with him at Malfoy Manor for the summer so they could get to know one another "as Slytherin brothers should." Theo magnanimously accepted both the apology and the invitation almost as if he had been expecting both.

Curfew soon came, and Olivia and Rodney were insistent that everyone go to bed on time. But the next morning, the majority the House rose early and rushed to the Owlery with urgent letters to mail home to their parents. Some were more detailed and discerning than others, but most carried a variation on the same basic theme:

"Something has fundamentally shifted in Slytherin House. And Harry Potter is the fulcrum upon which it has moved."

Draco Malfoy actually sent out *two* owls. His own personal owl carried a message for his father stating, among other things, that he had recently begun a friendship with Theo Nott, the son of Lucius's former associate, Tiberius Nott; that Draco had become concerned by how Tiberius Nott was treating Theo; and asking would it be possible for Lucius to prevail upon Tiberius to let young Theo spend the entire summer break with Draco at Malfoy Manor.

A second, nondescript school owl carried a much shorter unsigned message meant solely for the eyes of his mother, Narcissa Black Malfoy. It consisted of a single sentence.

"I will never reach the heights you desire for me while Harry Potter lives."

The Calm Before

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

CHAPTER 28: The Calm Before

22 April 1992

The next morning found Harry, Theo and Blaise sitting comfortably on a large bench in the foyer in front of the Great Hall. The commotion and buzz of their fellow Snakes, all of whom *for some reason* were early risers today, had the Slytherin Trio up early as well, but while breakfast had already begun, Harry didn't want to go in just yet. He'd spent the better part of a week avoiding Hermione and Neville while focused on his "Draco problem," but he'd missed his two Gryffindor friends, and so he waited patiently for them to come down. Theo and Blaise sat with him under a privacy charm as they discussed the events from the night before.

"So let's just go over this one more time, if just for my own piece of mind," said Theo. "Draco is now actively bound and obligated not only to refrain from trying to get me in trouble with Father but to also to do anything and everything he reasonably can to protect me from *any* harm – whether from Father or from any other source – by any means short of endangering his own life."

"Right," Harry said. "You can't make someone take an Unbreakable Vow that will require them to deliberately sacrifice their own life for another or even face a substantial risk of death in doing so, or I wouldn't have even

given him that much wiggle room. But he can't actively do anything to endanger you nor can he passively stand by while you're in danger unless he genuinely believes that trying to save you will get him killed."

"Uh-huh. There's probably a loophole in there, but I trust that you're smarter than Draco so he'll never be the one to find it. Anyway, Draco is also bound not to attempt to manipulate you or control you or seek revenge against you by threatening the health or safety any other person."

"Right again. He can still theoretically hurt people, but he can't do it for the express purpose of getting at me somehow. Again, you can't make an open-ended vow not to hurt anyone or to never commit a crime. Otherwise, they'd just make every wizard and witch take such a vow once they turn eleven and we'd be living in a utopia."

Theo nodded thoughtfully at that. His life would be much happier if he lived in such a utopia. "And he can't deliberately insult anyone on the basis of blood purity or blood politics. He can't say 'Mudblood' or 'blood traitor' as an insult to anyone, either to their face or when talking about them in the presence of anyone who he knows finds those terms offensive."

"Yep," said Harry with a smirk. "I did leave him the power to use those terms when he's by himself or surrounded by fellow bigots. I'm not a complete monster." The three boys laughed. "There are a few more minor clauses, but that's most of it. There's only so much that you can put in an Unbreakable Vow before it collapses under the weight of its own magic."

"Right," said Blaise drily. "Is that why you didn't put in any requirements that he refrain from directly threatening the

health and safety of *you personally*?"

"No, that got left out intentionally. It would have made things too easy."

"That," said Theo archly, "is the single most idiotically Gryffindorish thing you've *ever said*."

Harry snorted. "Take it up with Nidhogg. He insisted, and I'll need his vote to claim the Hydra Throne later so I went along with it. He said if I'm not going to kill my enemy after all the time I spent plotting it, then I shouldn't be allowed to just ... '*neuter*' him. Also, he says I need a strong rival within my age cohort, or I'll '*get soft*.'"

"I thought Jim was your rival," said Theo.

"He said a *strong* rival," Harry said drily, causing the other two boys to snicker.

"Hmm," said Blaise speculatively. "You could always '*neuter*' Malfoy and then pick a fight with Zachariah Smith, the Dark Prince of Hufflepuff." All three found that idea hilarious. Still laughing, Harry noticed Hermione and Neville walking down the hall in their direction. The three Slytherins stood as Harry dispelled the privacy charm. The two Gryffindors walked up somewhat nervously, but Harry gave them both a smile.

"Hermione, Neville, it's good to see you again! It's been a long week. A long ... complicated, demanding week. I've missed you both."

Hermione ran forward and hugged him, much to his surprise. "I've missed you too, Harry. And I'm so sorry for being so obnoxious to you last week. I was just so

concerned about Hagrid and I let it get to me. Can you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Hermione," he said reassuringly. "I was stressed out over some House matters myself, and it made me snappish, but they're resolved now."

"Are they things you can talk about now that they're ... resolved? Or is it still ... Slytherin stuff?" asked Neville.

"Still Slytherin stuff. But nothing we need to worry about any more. Now, I can join Hermione in obsessing over exams."

Hermione batted playfully at Harry's arm in response to that. Then, Blaise leaned in and muttered, "Malfoy. Three o'clock." Harry looked at him strangely and then glanced at his watch. Blaise gave him a look of consternation and then jerked his head towards the approaching Draco. Neville and Hermione saw the boy coming as well, and both grimaced.

"Well, that's probably our cue to leave," said Neville.

"Nonsense," said Harry confidently. "He probably just wants to wish us all a good morning." The other four students looked at Harry as though he'd gone mad.

Their surprise was only compounded when Draco actually did walk up and say cheerfully "Good morning, Harry, Theo and Blaise. And to you as well Mr. Longbottom and Miss Granger." Harry immediately wished Draco good morning as well, as did the others a few seconds later after the shock wore off.

"Miss Granger?" Draco continued with a slightly nervous smile. "Might I have a moment of your time?" She blinked repeatedly and then looked to an equally surprised Neville.

"Oh, it's quite alright if we speak in front of your friends. An apology that must be rendered in secrecy is hardly an apology at all, as my father would say."

"An...apology?" said Hermione in confusion.

"Yes," said Draco with what certainly *seemed* to be sincerity. "You must understand: I was raised in a very insular Pureblood household with very little knowledge of or experience of Muggles. *And* I was raised by two parents who were themselves similarly raised in similar insular environments etc. etc. going back several generations. Consequently, I came to Hogwarts with a great many preconceived notions about Muggleborns such as yourself, notions which were grounded in ignorance and, dare I say it, bigotry. Fortunately, recent conversations with Harry here have led me to, well, to reconsider my former views. I see now that it was foolish of me to disregard the potential of you and your fellow Muggleborn students simply because you were raised in a non-wizarding environment. Worse, I see that it was churlish and boorish of me to demean witches and wizards such as yourself for those same reasons and that such prejudice is unworthy of the House of Malfoy. Thus, I tender to you my most sincere and abject apologies for my prior conduct towards you and hope that after this we may start anew with one another."

Harry brutally suppressed the desire to laugh, not at Draco, but at the thunderstruck reactions of his friends. Blaise nudged him and mouthed "*minor clauses?*" Harry gave a small nod.

Finally, Hermione shook her head to clear it. "Your gracious apology is accepted, Mr. Malfoy. I too hope we can ... begin anew and develop some ... sort of ... friendship?" she finished somewhat lamely.

"Please, Miss Granger, call me Draco."

"... Only if you will call me Hermione," she said weakly.

"Certainly. Now there is one other matter I would like to discuss while I'm here. I know that exams are approaching, and you are undoubtedly short for time. But my two good friends, Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe, have been struggling with some of their school work. If you have any free time in your schedule, I wonder if you might be amenable to tutoring them for a few weeks. I would be happy to pay for your time. Say, four galleons an hour for the both of them?"

At that, the Muggleborn's eyes goggled. Depending on how many tutoring sessions they needed, that could be a substantial sum of money. "Oh, Mister, I mean, Draco, I couldn't possibly ..." Then, Harry coughed loudly to cover his "*Take it!*" She glanced at him for a second in mild frustration and then looked back at Draco. "That is, I couldn't possibly refuse such generosity. Mr. Goyle and Mr. Crabbe are fortunate to have you as a friend."

Draco smiled again, and once again, it looked relatively sincere. "You're very kind. I'll owl you their schedules, and we'll arrange for you to meet with them at your convenience." He put out his hand. She did likewise. Then, he took her hand gently and kissed it on the knuckles. "Until then, Hermione."

After he left, Hermione turned to Harry in shock. "What was that about?!"

"If a Pureblood of higher social standing offers you money for a task and you turn him down and offer to do it for less, it turns it into an offer of charity on your part. Under some

circumstances, that can be taken as an insult to the Pureblood."

"No! Not that! I mean ... *EVERYTHING!*" she exclaimed.

"Yeah," said a flummoxed Neville. "This is ... beyond the universe of possible things."

"As I said, it's been a long and complicated week. Beyond that, I can't say anything except that Draco should be ... mostly decent, at least for the foreseeable future. Enjoy it while we can."

Neville looked like he wanted to ask more questions, but Hermione just chose to accept this new development as one more bit of weirdness. "Well, now that we're back together, what are your plans for this evening after dinner?"

"Miss Granger!" said Harry, who suddenly put his hand over his heart. "How very forward of you! You're not trying to make Mr. Malfoy jealous, are you?"

She punched him in the shoulder and called him a prat. Harry laughed. "Okay, okay. No, I've no plans right now. What's up?"

"I'd like your help on a project. I want to see if there's a way to get our parchments to talk."

"To ... talk? What, to each other?"

"Yes. Well, I mean, I'll send a message to your parchment, only instead of you reading it, you'll actually hear my voice."

This time, it was Harry's turn to be goggle-eyed. "You're making telephones ... out of paper."

"Yes," she smiled. "Isn't magic wonderful?" In retrospect, that dreamy expression on his friend's face should have been the first clue it would all end in tears.

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Naturally, it couldn't possibly be that easy. Over the course of the next several weeks, Hermione, Harry and several of their friends from the study group experimented with various magical techniques for modifying or transmitting sounds, but nothing they tried provided any benefits comparable to Muggle telephones. This particular Sunday evening found Hermione and Harry in an unused classroom on the second floor at a table covered in books about sound-based charms, communications charms, switching charms, and general enchantment charms. Neville, Theo and Blaise were there to provide moral support ... mostly by working on improving their Exploding Snap skills. As curfew drew near and Hermione was about ready to admit defeat, Harry, who had discretely brought a few books from the Lair, perked up.

"Hang on a minute, Hermione. Demonstrate that Sound Enhancing Charm for me again."

"Harry, it doesn't work on parchment. I think we've established that."

"No, no. Just ... demonstrate it. On yourself, I suppose."

She shrugged, flicked her wand, and touched it to her throat while saying "***SONOROUS!***" Then, she said "LIKE THIS!" with the spell greatly amplifying the sound of her voice. Harry nodded, wincing, as she cast the counterspell.

"Okay," he said. "So it's *flick*, then touch the object or person to be amplified, while saying 'Sonorous' with the

accent on the second syllable."

"Exactly."

"*Except*, in this book," he held up a much older looking book, "there's a different way of doing it. Here, it looks like a reverse triangle followed by a downstroke and you say 'Sonorous' with the accent on the *first* syllable. Like this." Harry demonstrated the alternate technique. Then, everyone in the room covered their ears in pain as a deafening, high pitched shriek erupted from Harry's wand. Harry, who'd been holding his wand right next to his own head, yelled in pain and reflexively pointed the wand away from himself and his friends. Unfortunately, that meant the wand was pointed *towards* the row of glass windows overlooking the courtyard below. And with a mighty crash, each of the windows shattered and exploded outward. Finally, Harry was able to silence the awful sound with a *Quietus* Charm before any more damage was inflicted.

Everyone stared, aghast. Finally, Hermione stormed over to Harry and snatched the book away from him. "Harry! What did you do?!" She turned the book over and read the cover. "Harry, this is a Fourth Year DADA book! That was a curse!"

"WHAT?!" he shouted. "I CAN'T HEAR YOU! DID THE SPELL SILENCE EVERYONE OR SOMETHING?"

Neville slapped his hand to his forehead. "Great. And now, Harry's deaf! Can this get any worse?"

Immediately, the door to the classroom was flung open, and Argus Filch, the caretaker, stormed in and glowered in fury at the children. His anger only grew when he noticed that all of the room's windows had been blown out.

Blaise gave Neville a dirty look. "You just had to say that, didn't you."

And that was how Harry and Hermione got their very first Hogwarts detentions. After Harry spent the first night in the infirmary having his eardrums regrown, the two would spend the next five evenings helping Kettleburn and Hagrid brew a foul mixture of cow's blood, sheep's brains, goats' innards, and warm brandy to feed to the newborn dragon. Norbert had hatched weeks before, just days after Harry's final confrontation with Draco in the Lair. A few minutes after the hatching, Norbert's name changed to Norberta after Professor Kettleburn confirmed her gender. For the first few weeks, only the CoMC students and Hagrid had access to her, but eventually, the dragon had grown too big for Kettleburn's classroom, and she was relocated to a pen located near Hagrid's hut which had been warded to keep her from trying to leave or fly away. Since then, nearly every Hogwarts student had been by at least once to see the rapidly growing dragon. According to Kettleburn, she was in perfect health and would be transferred to the Romanian sanctuary via apparation in early July. And having spent the last five nights preparing the dragon's foul-smelling nutrient mixture, Hermione and Harry decided they would be happy to see her gone. As the two walked back to the castle after their last night of detention (both stinking to high heaven), Hermione finally snapped at her friend.

"I just want you to know that I'm going to use up a whole bottle of shampoo when I take a shower before bed tonight... AND I BLAME YOU ENTIRELY!"

"*Me?!*" exclaimed Harry. "It was your unauthorized experiments in high-level enchantments meant to revolutionize the wizarding world that got us into this."

"And it was your reckless use of a Fourth Year combat spell from a DADA book that had been discontinued for thirty years that blew out all the windows!"

"Says the girl who scavenges Diagon Alley for old books containing lock-picking Charms! Besides, it's not my fault some the idiot decided that the Voice Amplification Charm and the Glass Shattering Curse should have the exact same incantation but with a different vowel emphasized!" he said irritably.

"Why did you even bring a DADA book anyway?" she asked, equally irritated.

"Well, I didn't *mean* to. I just ... we have a small private library in the Slytherin dorms. I ... got access to it and just used an Accio to summon every book containing sound-related Charms."

"*What?! You used a general summoning spell for books in the Slytherin library?! We're lucky you didn't speak some Forbidden Killing Word like 'Muad'Dib' or something!*"

"Maude who?"

"*Muad'Dib!* From Frank Herbert's... oh, never mind!" said the exasperated Hermione as she pulled a bit of goat intestine out of her bushy hair.

"Why are you so mad at me anyway?"

"Because for five nights in a row, I have had to return to Gryffindor Tower *stinking of viscera and offal and ... I WANT TO BLAME SOMEBODY!*"

He looked at her and crooked an eyebrow. She looked back at him angrily. Finally, after a few seconds, they both burst

into laughter, and the tension drained away.

"Aauugh!" said Hermione. "Sorry. This has just been the worst week of my life. Six years of Muggle primary without so much as a demerit, and I get a week long detention at Hogwarts for '*participating in an act of vandalism*.' My parents will be so thrilled."

"Hermione, I'm sorry too. I should have double-checked what kind of book I was reading before I cast the spell. But as awful as it was, we're finally done. Tonight was the last night of detention, and anyway, it was for a good cause, helping Kettleburn and Hagrid with the dragon. Besides, it could always have been worse."

Hermione scoffed. "How could any detention have *possibly* been worse than that?!"

"I dunno, they could have made us go monster-hunting in the Forbidden Forest or something like that."

"Oh please! The staff here can be cruel with their detentions, but none of them are deranged!"

The two laughed as they entered the castle and made their way to their respective dorms. Neither noticed that behind them, in the distance, Hagrid stood at the edge of that very Forbidden Forest, where he was engaged in an animated conversation with several angry Centaurs.

4 June 1992

Once their detentions were complete, Harry and his friends focused on preparing for their end-of-year exams. By the time exams started, Hermione had also made nearly a hundred Galleons beating knowledge into Crabbe and Goyle's equally thick heads, but she felt confident that they

would pass everything if they didn't panic. The DADA exam had come first, and Harry felt confident that he'd aced it, despite the handicap of the class having been taught by a stammering idiot possibly possessed by a dark lord. The Potions exam was the next day, and afterwards, Harry stayed behind to discretely inquire if there had been "any developments." Snape responded that everything is well in hand, but that the Headmaster was expected to be away from school on the following Thursday, so that might be a good night to turn in early. Harry nodded at the hint, relieved that the whole Quirrell mess would soon be over. The final exam was History of Magic on Thursday morning, after which he spent the afternoon hanging out with his friends by the lake shore. Harry also asked Hermione and Neville about whether Jim and Ron were still fixated on the Stone, and they promised to keep an eye on the two that evening and make sure they didn't do anything foolish. After dinner, Harry spent time relaxing with in the Slytherin Common Room. Draco came by to inform the group that Theo would be coming straight from King's Cross to Malfoy Manor for the whole summer, and that he hoped that Harry and Blaise could come and visit at some point. As always, nowadays, he *seemed* sincere.

Marcus Flint also came by, insistent that Harry get a broom over the summer and try out for Quidditch in the fall, as they would have several positions open. Flint also pulled Harry aside and let him know that the older boy was planning on retaking several of his OWLS that summer in hopes of getting into some additional NEWT classes before graduating. Depending on how it turned out, he might have to stay in school for an extra year. Unfortunately, his parents, who did not place great store on education, were opposed to paying for an eighth year, particularly in light of how poorly Marcus had done in the past. He asked if Harry had any advice about "getting back on track." Harry

assured him that he'd do whatever it took to help the other boy pay for extra schooling.

As curfew came, Harry headed up to bed. He was eager for everything to be over – the Quirrell situation, the exam results, even the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch match (which would likely determine the winner of the House Cup). He would miss his friends over the summer, at least until he had the chance to visit them, but part of him was looking forward to spending his days back at 4 Privet Drive locked in his room with a big stack of books from the Lair and away from scheming Slytherin rivals, spoiled Gryffindor siblings, and murderous dark lords. Anxiety kept Harry from sleep, and so he immediately jumped when, just after midnight, the stack of enchanted parchments he'd placed under his pillow softly dinged with the particular tone indicating a message from Hermione. He quickly lit a Lumos beneath his closed bed curtains and put on his glasses. He immediately assumed the worst – that Jim and Ron had gotten past Hermione and Neville and were on their way to the Third Floor corridor. Then, he read the message and instantly realized how badly he'd underestimated what *"the worst"* might be.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter. This is Professor Quirinus Quirrell, writing to you by way of Miss Granger's ingenious little parchment. I think it's time we had a little chat."

Chapter End Notes

AN: "Yeah," said a flummoxed Neville. "This is ... beyond the universe of possible things." is a slight alteration of a similar line from Chapter 55 of "Family Bonds" by xXDesertRoseXx, in which the Neville of that story is similarly confused by Draco showing an apparent heel-

face turn. I've always loved that line and that fic, so consider this an homage.

Final Exam pt 1

CHAPTER 29: Final Exam (pt 1)

"Good evening, Mr. Potter. This is Professor Quirinus Quirrell, writing to you by way of Miss Granger's ingenious little parchment. I think it's time for us to have a little chat."

Harry read Quirrell's message three times before he thought to run through a quick Occlumency exercise to calm his thoughts from utter panic down to cool rationality. Then, he snatched up his wand and instantly sent three whispered silencing charms to the beds of Draco, Crabbe and Goyle so that they wouldn't hear anything before yelling for Blaise and Theo to wake up and come over to his bed. The parchment dinged again.

"I'm a busy man, Mr. Potter, so I'd appreciate a quick response, before I assume that Miss Granger misled me as to how this parchment functions and I'm forced to interrogate her more forcefully."

Harry gritted his teeth, took a deep breath, and replied: *"I'm here. What do you want of me? And what have you done with Hermione?"*

"Nothing yet, I assure you. Well, nothing beyond a few minor psychic manipulations, anyway. You're a clever little serpent, Potter, but you're still only eleven, and not quite so clever as you may think you are. Your efforts to avoid all eye contact with me made it patently obvious that you know of my ... information-gathering skills, but your Gryffindor friends were not so well-prepared, and I pieced together most of what I needed from their memories. I

*know you have deduced that I was behind the troll incident and your brother's subsequent Quidditch difficulties last semester. I know you have deduced that I am here at Hogwarts in order to acquire a certain object hidden on the Third Floor. And thanks to a particularly vivid memory from your brother, I know that you have interacted with a certain enchanted mirror and successfully escaped its clutches under your own power. Or perhaps you merely took advantage of special characteristics imbued within the Mirror by the Headmaster that make it less dangerous for children than for adults. Regardless, I would like to engage your assistance in retrieving the object of **my** heart's desire from its current resting place which is, I believe, within said mirror."*

Harry responded: "Why on Earth would I help you with that?" As he waited for the reply, he told his two friends to get dressed quickly, as he started pulling on his own trousers over his pajamas to save time.

"Because I am presently in the same room with that mirror along with four little Gryffindors who thought they could sneak in and steal the Stone in order to 'save it' from the nasty old DADA instructor. Well, two of them. The other two apparently expected to find Severus Snape down here. Silly boys. I am, of course, speaking of Miss Granger and Messrs. Longbottom, Weasley and Potter Minor. While your disdain for the latter two is well-known, Potter Major, so is your affinity for the first two."

Blaise shook his head. "Hermione and Neville would have never gone along with something as stupid as helping the Git and the Weasel *steal* the Stone." Harry agreed and sent that statement as a message. Quirrell quickly responded.

*"Unlike your Headmaster, boy, I am not in the habit of leaving things to chance. I penetrated to the last room of Dumbledore's gauntlet three weeks ago. But when I recognized the Mirror from Potter Minor's memories, I came to suspect the nature of the old man's trap. It took me months to learn the secret of dealing with the Cerberus without raising alarm, but everything else was challenging but hardly insurmountable ... until the room with the Mirror. I imagine the Headmaster expected me to easily pass through the first six rooms and then, pluming myself on my own ego, plunge headfirst into the Mirror and become trapped by my 'heart's desire.' I think not. Instead, I choose to invite you to join me here, Potter Major, to see if you can recover the Stone for me. You've already proven your ability to gaze into the Mirror without being trapped, so it seems logical to assume you can penetrate the Stone's protections. To ensure your compliance, I placed a Confundus Curse on the DADA exams of your pet Gryffindors, one designed to lure them here tonight in spite of your warnings to avoid the Third Floor. I would have put one directly on **you**, but you are clearly strong-willed and have obviously received some training in psychic defense, so I thought it more prudent to target your more pliable associates, all four of whom currently lie at my feet, bound by the Incarcerous Charm."*

"I await you at the end of Dumbledore's gauntlet, Potter Major, although you will find most of his traps already deactivated. Those remaining should be no problem for such a clever young serpent as you. Tell no one, and come alone. You have twenty minutes before the bad things start. Do the math, Mr. Potter. Four Gryffindors equals forty fingers and forty toes before I move on to the larger extremities. Your time starts - Now!"

Harry cursed and then tapped the parchment five times to lock in the writing on it before it reset. Then, he handed the parchment to Theo. "Get that to Snape. Both of you. Make sure he understands that Quirrell has hostages."

"No," said Theo quickly.

"Theo..."

"No, *shut up!* You're not going to face him alone! It's not happening, and you don't have time to argue with me about it, so just accept the reality that I'm coming with you!"

Theo handed the parchment off to Blaise, who just looked back and forth between the parchment and his friends before holding the paper out to Harry, who had just put his wand holster on and was pulling a jumper on to conceal it. "What he said."

Harry wasted three whole seconds fuming at his friends before he snatched the paper out of Blaise's hand in a fury. "It's like I'm surrounded by *bloody Gryffindors!*" he snarled as he bolted out the door, the other two close behind. It took another fifteen seconds before he was racing down Prefect's Row, practically yelling the password for the Lair as he did. Inside, he found what he was looking for: Rodney and Olivia poring over old NEWT questions. They both looked up him in surprise.

"No time to explain!" he said breathlessly. He handed the parchment to Olivia. "Get this to Snape as fast as you can. If you can't find him, then McGonagall or Flitwick. Lives depend on this." Then, he turned and ran out again, hoping that the two prefects took him seriously.

Four minutes later, the Sytherin Trio was at the forbidden door. Harry looked at his friends once again as he struggled

to catch his breath. "You really don't have to do this. It's dangerous and reckless. He just wants me."

"You're wasting time, Potter," said Theo. "Neville and Hermione are my friends, and they're in trouble. So I'm there for them. Just like I'm there for you."

Harry's face flushed at having his own words used against him, especially by the boy who had once been so timid and who'd claimed that he wasn't any good at "all this kindness stuff." Harry turned and cast the Alohamora on the door. It clicked open, and the three quietly entered the room. Inside, they looked around in the gloom. The Cerberus appeared to be asleep. Harry's eyes widened – he'd heard about the monstrosity in September, but this was his first chance to actually see it. Off in a nearby corner, Blaise noticed a golden harp lying on the floor. Harry took a step forward, and the floor creaked. Instantly, the right eye on Fluffy's middle head flicked open, and the creature started to stir. Harry and Theo froze in terror, but Blaise simply pointed his wand at the harp and calmly said "**MUSICA - BRAHMS LULLABY.**" Instantly, the harp floated up into the air and started playing a soothing tune. The Cerberus quickly drifted off back to sleep.

"What spell was that?" Harry asked in relief.

"Wasn't a spell," Blaise said softly. "That harp's a fairly common enchanted item. You say 'Musica' and then name a song, and the harp will jump up and start playing it automatically. Quirrell probably bought that in a music shop in Diagon Alley. My mom's got at least three of them."

"How did you know music would put Fluffy to sleep?" asked Theo as the trio edged around the hellhound towards the trap door behind him.

"I didn't. I walked into a room with a sleeping Cerberus that five people have somehow already gotten past, and I noticed a magic harp in the corner looking obviously out of place. Two plus two equals four."

Harry and Theo nodded at his impeccable Slytherin logic. The trap door was still open, and they could make out a faint bluish light from below. "Now what?" asked Blaise.

"Now, you two lower me with the Levitation Charm," said Theo. Harry started to say something but Theo cut him off. "I'm lighter than either of you, and you're both better with the Charm than me. This way, you can lower me slowly and at a controlled rate, I can check out the room safely, and you can pull me right back up if there's any danger."

Harry reluctantly agreed. "This should be Sprout's room, so you're looking for dangerous plants." Theo nodded and fired off a Lumos with his wand, while the other two cast the Levitation Charm on him and slowly lowered him into the room. After about five seconds, he called back up.

"Definitely plants. Looks like some sort of thick moving vines at the edges of the room. There's a circle of Bluebell Flames keeping them at bay and then a path leading to the door. Better hurry though - the flames look to be dying out."

With that, the other two lowered Theo all the way to the floor, and then, they all took turns levitating each other. By the time Harry touched down, one of the more aggressive vines had slithered past the openings in the circle of flames in the direction of Theo's foot. Harry saw it and instinctively said "Back off!" The vines instantly withdrew, and the other two boys stared at Harry in surprise.

"Parseltongue works on killer vines?" said Blaise in surprise.

"I dunno. Was I using Parseltongue just then?" asked Harry.

"Yes. Didn't you know?"

Harry shrugged as he headed for the door. "Honestly, it all sounds English to me. Snakes born in other countries sound like they have foreign accents and most snakes drag their 'S' sounds, but I always hear it in English. I never even realized I was hissing back to them until Theo told me the first time I brought him into the Lair."

The next room was a large empty chamber. On the far side was a heavy wooden door that appeared to have hundreds of quivering metal keys forcefully embedded into it. As the boys drew nearer, they saw that each key had a set of wings that was fluttering uselessly. To the side of the door was a rack of brooms with one empty slot. Blaise tried the door, but it was locked and resistant to the Alohamora. Harry looked around speculatively.

"So, a big room with a high ceiling. Winged keys. And brooms. Obviously, the keys *were* airborne and you had to fly after them with a broom until you found the right one ... at which point the rest of the keys became hostile and attacked. Someone - probably Jim - got the key, threw it to someone on the ground who opened the door, and then the Git flew through ..." Harry looked towards the door and the twitching keys imbedded in it. "Which means the key is on the *other side!*" he finished angrily.

Blaise knelt and examined the door. "Yep. I can see the key still in the lock." He pulled out a piece of parchment from one of his pockets.

"Is that one of Hermione's parchments?" asked Harry.

"Yeah, sometimes we like to talk about homework and ... other stuff." Blaise unfolded the parchment and carefully slide it most of the way under the door. Harry watched his friend, feeling curious and mildly jealous that Blaise and Hermione had "stuff" to talk about that he wasn't privy to. Then, Blaise carefully aimed his wand into the keyhole and said "**WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA.**" He jiggled his wand gently, and after a few seconds, there was a clink as the key fell out of the lock and onto the parchment. Then, he pulled the parchment back underneath the door with the key resting on top. Blaise snatched up the key triumphantly and unlocked the door.

"That was *BRILLIANT!*" exclaimed Theo in amazement.

"Well, I *am* brilliant and normally would be happy for it to be acknowledged, but I must confess that in this case, I got the idea from an old episode of *Scooby-Doo*." The other two looked at him blankly. "Okay, I understand Theo, but do you mean to tell me, Muggle-raised Harry Potter, that you have *never heard* of *Scooby-Doo*?!"

Harry shrugged. "The only time I ever got to watch television was when I stayed with the crazy cat lady across the lane while my relatives went on holiday. She preferred soap operas and spaghetti westerns, so if you want to talk about Sergio Leone films or maybe *Coronation Street*, I'm your guy."

Blaise sighed as the three passed through the open door. "We are getting you a TV and a cable box for your room at the Dursleys, Harry, whatever it takes."

The next room was equally large but with a much lower ceiling. There was a giant chessboard covered in huge -

and mostly broken – pieces.

"A chess game," said Harry. "But of course."

"It's just a good thing these traps didn't reset after the Gryffs made it through," said Theo. "There's no way we'd be able to play a chess game in the amount of time we have left."

As they made their way through the rubble of the chessboard, Blaise spoke out with feigned casualness. "So, we've been through a Herbology trap, a Seeker's trap, and now a Chess Prodigy's trap. Anyone else sensing a pattern?" Theo's eyebrows shot up as he considered the significance of what Blaise said. Harry just looked grim.

"Yes, I've noticed," he replied tersely. "But at the moment, it's not at the top of our to-do list, so let's table that matter for now." The next room contained an unconscious troll which they passed quickly. The one after that was a small room with a table situated in an alcove. As soon as the three passed inside, purple flames arose from the archway behind them and black ones from the one up ahead. On the table was a row of potion vials and a parchment containing what appeared to be a riddle which Harry started reading aloud.

"Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind, Two of us will help you, whichever you would find... OH COME ON!" He glanced at his watch. They had less than three minutes. "We won't get finished *reading* this thing in three minutes, let alone solve it!"

"Then, we'll do it the Slytherin way," said Theo as he started emptying his pockets onto the table. "We'll cheat." Out of the pile he'd made, the boy picked up a small leather case that could fit in the palm of his hand. Opening it, he removed what appeared to be a monocle on a brass chain.

He breathed on it softly which immediately caused the clear lens to tint itself amber. Then, he slowly started moving it across the potions.

"Another gift from Alex?" asked Harry.

"Yes. It detects poisons, dangerous potions, and other potentially harmful things that might be added to food or drink. Just the thing if all your meals are provided by a filicidal monster."

"Fili-what?" asked Blaise.

"Filicidal. It means someone who wants to kill his or her own children." Theo glanced up at the other two who seemed doubtful. "It's a real word. I looked it up. Anyway, these three are poisonous," he said pointing out different vials, "while these two are non-poisonous but have a fairly high alcohol content. Now, if we plug that additional information into the logic puzzle..." he thought for a moment, "that means this potion lets you go forward and this one lets you go back."

"Great job, Theo," said Harry. "Okay, here's the plan. We dump out one of the vials of nettle wine, and I'll use the Gemino Charm to duplicate enough of the backwards potion for both of you to leave and make sure help is coming. I'll distract Quirrell until you get back."

"Hmm, that is one option," said Blaise. "Here's another. We dump out *two* vials of nettle wine, and you use the Gemino Charm to make enough of the *forwards* potion for all of us."

"You can't go with me, guys. He said to come alone."

Theo raised his hand to show off his family ring. "I don't know if I ever mentioned it since you haven't done anything

crazy enough to need it in a while, but this ring *can* confer a Notice-Me-Not effect on multiple people if they all maintain physical contact and can all hold their breathe long enough. You can go in and distract him while we creep in behind you and set up a sneak attack."

"No, it's too dangerous..."

"It's just Quirrell! If we can get at him from behind, we can..."

"It's Voldemort," interrupted Harry.

"What?" said Blaise dully. "I'm sorry, *WHAT?!*" Theo just stood still, speechless and horrified.

"Quirrell is being possessed by the spiritual remnants of Voldemort. He wants the Philosopher's Stone to create a new physical body for himself. And when he realizes that the Stone's a fake, he's going to start killing everybody. That is, unless I go in and stall him until help arrives."

"And why *precisely* are we finding this out now," hissed Blaise as he grabbed Harry's arm to look at his watch, "with less than a minute and a half to go?!"

"I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you, but Voldemort has access to this power called Legilimency that lets him read minds. If I'd told you anything about it, you'd have only been in danger. And I assume if he can sense your thoughts with it, he could probably see through the Notice-Me-Not."

"Uh-huh," said Blaise sarcastically. "Apropos of nothing, but did you *ever* figure out the secret behind that VHS tape I gave you for Christmas?"

Harry blinked. "Yeah, of course. It was a ... transfigured ... Occlumency ... book..." He trailed off sheepishly.

"Right. And it never occurred to you that maybe I gave it as a gift because I got it myself *at the age of eight* and had already learned everything I could from it?!"

Harry's mouth opened and closed repeatedly before he finally blurted out "I've had a lot of things on my mind since Christmas! I ... I got distracted!"

"Obviously," deadpanned Blaise.

"Which book?" asked Theo curiously. "**Moste Hidden Arte** or **Aegis Mentalis**?"

"Neither. It was **Pathways of the Mind**."

"Oooo, I've heard good things about that one, but it's banned in Britain."

"Well, you can borrow Harry's copy since, evidently, he's never opened it," Blaise replied acidly.

Harry looked back and forth between the other two Slytherins in consternation. "Do you mean to tell me that I've been keeping *all of this* to myself since November in order to protect my friends from danger, and my two best Slytherin friends have been studying Occlumency since the age of ...?"

"Eight," said Blaise.

"Nine. *Of course* I learned how to conceal my thoughts! *Filicidal dad*, remember?" added Theo.

Harry drew breath to scream "GAAAAAAH!" at the top of his lungs, but his two friends hastily cast a Silencing Spell on him since there was a dark lord somewhere nearby and so some degree of subtlety was called for.

Final Exam pt 2

CHAPTER 30: Final Exam (pt 2)

It had felt so ... *right*. That was the worst thing about it to Hermione. She and Neville had talked just that afternoon with Harry about the Third Floor corridor and the Philosopher's Stone and about how important it was to keep an eye on Jim and Ron and make sure they didn't do anything foolish. They'd even stayed up in the common room a few hours after curfew talking in case the two tried to sneak by. But instead, Jim and Ron just walked boldly up to them right before midnight to tell them that Dumbledore had been lured away, that Snape was going to steal the Stone that night, that no one would listen to them, and that their only chance was to steal the Stone themselves before Snape got to it. And suddenly ... it felt *right*.

Not that bit about Snape, of course. Hermione trusted Harry's judgment on that score, and she agreed with him that Quirrell was likely the culprit. Nevertheless, it suddenly felt *right* to think that whoever the thief was, no one else would be able to stop him except a quartet of First Year students who didn't know any major combat-related spells more powerful than the Leg-Locker Curse ... that Quirrel himself had taught them! But none of that mattered, because trying to stop him was *right*, and everything else would take care of itself.

Jim's invisibility cloak was a tight fit, but they all made it to the Third Floor without incident. The Cerberus was still waiting, albeit a little groggy looking. She'd noticed a small harp lying on the ground nearby, but Jim was already on the case. Apparently, Hagrid has accidentally revealed to him that music could put the hound to sleep, which Jim did with

a handmade flute the half-giant had given him for Christmas. The trapdoor was already open, but Neville stopped everyone from proceeding as he took a big sniff from the musty room below. Immediately, he informed the group that the room below was full of Devil's Snare, a dangerous carnivorous plant that killed by crushing its prey but which was extremely vulnerable to fire. Neville went first and used the Bluebell Flame Charm to clear a path for everyone else.

Jim's Seeker skills made short work of the Key Room, but Hermione thought it was odd that someone would design a defense for the Stone that could only be overcome by exemplary Quidditch skills. Something about it seemed ... *not quite right*, but she shook off her concerns as they made it through to the next room which contained a giant Wizard's Chess board. That seemed *even less right* to Hermione, but she saw no options but to play. There was a moment of terror when Ron chose to sacrifice the knight he was riding in order to ensure a quick victory. She screamed as the other piece charged towards him, but at the last second, Neville cast the Levitation Charm on Ron, lifting him out of the way of the attacking piece and setting him down gently by the side of the board.

"Well done, Neville," she'd said excitedly.

"Yeah!" he replied in excitement. "And I didn't even set him on fire!"

"Wait, WHAT?!" exclaimed Ron. "Was that a thing that might have happened?!"

"Um, never mind," said Hermione quickly. "Forget he said anything. Jim, take the king so we can get out of here."

He did, and the quartet proceeded on through the next room and its already incapacitated troll to what Hermione thought was the penultimate room. Hermione easily solved Snape's logic puzzle, but even as she did, she had to push down the growing feeling of *not right, indeed quite possibly wrong* that was beginning to worry her. What also worried her was that there was only one potion to go forward and one to go back, which mean that two people would apparently be stranded in this room until help arrived ... which might be a while since they hadn't bothered to tell anyone where they were going, something that Hermione suddenly thought was quite out of character for her and *very wrong indeed*. But before she could go any farther to articulate that thought, Jim distracted her with an observation about the potion vials.

"Hang on a minute. These are auto-refilling vials. My dad carries a set of these. Aurors use them in the field to carry healing potions and the like. When you've completely emptied one, they refill a minute or two later with more of the potion that gets summoned from a central reservoir at DMLE headquarters."

"That makes sense," said Neville. "It wouldn't do for a thief to figure out how to get past those flames and leave no way for a pursuer to go after him. Besides, if Quirrell or Snape or whoever has already been this way, then he must have used the right potion but none of them are empty. So who's going first?"

"Me," said Jim somberly. "This ... this is my job. It always has been. Once I go through, I want each of you to take turns using the other potion to get out of here and bring help. If I can't figure out how to beat Snape," he glanced at Hermione and Neville, "or maybe Quirrell, I guess, it's up to you to get the other teachers down here."

He downed the potion and went through the black flames. None of the others made any move towards the potion that would allow passage back through the purple flames. After a minute, the potion vial Jim had emptied refilled itself. Ron picked it up and said, "You two can do what you want, but Jim's my friend and he's not facing ... whoever is in there alone." He took the potion, tossed the empty vial to Neville, and went through the black flames.

Neville looked back at Hermione with an anguished expression. She put her head in her hands while trying to fathom how they'd gotten themselves into this position, but thinking about that too much made her head hurt. After a few seconds, she looked up at the sound of Neville guzzling down the potion to go forward. Then, he put the empty vial back on the rack, picked up the vial to go back, and placed it in Hermione's hands.

"Go back, Hermione. You're the smart one. Get out of here and bring us some backup. I'll help Jim and Ron hold the fort as long as we can." Then, he hugged the girl before turning and running through the black flames leaving her alone. She stared at the flames for what seemed an eternity and then looked down at the potion in her hand, the one that would allow her to leave this place and summon help. She willed herself to open the stopper and do what she knew was the proper and sensible thing to do. She continued to focus on the potion in her hand for several minutes even after the vial the others had used refilled itself. But for all her will and intellect, she found herself completely unable to do the smart thing. Instead, she was compelled to do *the right thing*, and so she swapped the potion in her hand for the one Neville had just used and gulped it down without a thought. Pulling her wand, she darted through the flames, bolstered by the feeling that she was doing *the right thing*. It wasn't until she saw Professor

Quirrell looking up at her smugly with the three Gryffindor boys bound at his feet that the realization of her *absolute wrongness* struck her like a thunderbolt.

Seconds later, Hermione too was bound alongside her house-mates. Then, Quirrell summoned the parchment that allowed her to communicate with Harry. "How does this work, Miss Granger?" he said almost mildly. She said nothing and just glared at him angrily. "Miss Granger, if I have to ask you a second time, it will only be after I've introduced one of your friends to the Cruciatus Curse. I'm sure your friend Mr. Longbottom has mentioned it. It's the curse that reduced his parents to semi-catatonic vegetables. Do you want me to ensure that Longbottom and his parents are reunited? *Permanently*?"

"Don't tell him anything, Hermione," said Neville firmly.

"Ah, Gryffindor courage. How predictably noble," Quirrell said with a smirk. Then, he pulled his wand out and pointed it at Neville's head.

"Stop!" exclaimed Hermione. "I ... I'll tell." And then she explained how the parchments operated.

"Thank you, Miss Granger. Oh, don't look so disappointed in your friend, Mr. Longbottom. I'm sure she believes that if I send a message to Potter Major, he, being a sensible young Slytherin, will go straight to a teacher. What Miss Granger fails to appreciate is the flaw in Potter Major's otherwise aggressively Slytherin nature – when his friends are in danger, he quite loses all sense of proportion. Isn't that right, Potter Minor?"

Jim gritted his teeth at the "Potter Minor" designation that reminded him of his second-born status. But after the events of Boxing Day, he knew Quirrell was right. If Harry

thought one of his friends was in trouble, he could be as reckless as any Gryffindor. Quirrell idly conjured a chair, sat down, and began sending messages, presumably to Harry. Then, after a few minutes, he pocketed the parchment and pulled out a pocket watch.

"Twenty minutes. Then, we'll see just how much Gryffindor spirit Harry Potter has in him." With a casual wave, he added gags to the bonds on the four students, and then, he closed his eyes, almost as if napping. The children struggled but were not able to break the magical bonds that held them. After a lengthy interval, Quirrell opened his eyes and checked his pocket watch again. "Hmm, it seems Mr. Potter is more Slytherin than I thought," he said, banishing the chair as he moved towards the bound children. "Or perhaps simply not as clever. So how should I motivate him, I wonder? As I understand it, Potter Major cares little for his brother and less for Mr. Weasley. That leaves you, Miss Granger, and you, Mr. Longbottom." With a flick of his wand, he removed the gags from the four children. "Now, who wants to scream first?"

Before any of the Gryffindors could respond, a commanding voice cried out from the staircase that led down into the room. "QUIRRELL! I'm here. You can stop acting like a villain from some Muggle comic book."

Quirrell whirled about to face Harry Potter in surprise. For a second, Hermione was confused, as it looked more like Jim instead of Harry who had entered the room. Then she realized – this was the first time since September that she'd seen him in casual attire and without Sleekeazy in his hair.

"Mr. Potter! And just in the nick of time!" said Quirrell confidently.

"Yes, I heard your evil gloating as I was coming down the stairs. Very spooky." Quirrell glowered at the boy who was suddenly grateful for his limited Occlumency training. Without it, he'd be having another panic attack right now, like the one in Snape's classroom except out loud this time. Instead, he was able to suppress his instinct to curl up into a tiny whimpering ball and project the same confidence he displayed in the Prince's Lair back when dealing with Draco. "Tell me, Professor Quirrell," he continued, hoping to keep the man's attention on him. "It's just us now, so we can be honest with one another. What in Merlin's name happened to you? All the upper year students I spoke to who remember you do so fondly. A kind, intelligent man who'd obtained a Mastery in the field of Muggle Studies, one who was respected by his students and his fellow teachers. Now, you're a cackling villain who talks of torturing children to get your way."

Quirrell laughed cruelly. "I left Hogwarts for a year's sabbatical before taking a turn as the Defense instructor. Still so young and foolish I was, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Then, I found him - my master. He showed me the truth of the world, showed me how wrong I was. There is no good or evil. There is only..."

"Power," interrupted Harry. "Power and those too weak to understand it. Yes, I *am* familiar with that quotation. It was in **Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts** and was first attributed to the Dark Lord Emeric who ravaged Britain in the 14th Century. And yet *somehow*, Emeric's words didn't stop people from calling him *Emeric the Evil*." Harry snorted almost contemptuously at Quirrell. "It's kind of funny, actually, that your master patterned himself on one of the few Gryffindors who became a dark lord. That actually explains a lot of his bad habits. Incidentally, did your master

ever mention to you that those words were part of Emeric's final statement just moments before his execution?"

Quirrell found himself taken aback by the boy's eerily calm demeanor as well as his knowledge of dark matters. Then, a rasping, sibilant voice echoed around the room. **"Enough talk. Get the Stone! Ussse the Boy!"** The four bound Gryffindors looked around wildly at the menacing voice, and Harry stiffened at the sound.

Quirrell gestured angrily towards him. "Come here, *Potter!*" he spat. Harry slowly walked towards Quirrell and the Mirror. His plan at the moment was to look into the Mirror, hope that he could resist its power now that he knew how it worked, and then spin a bunch of lies to keep Quirrell and his "master" occupied until grownups showed up. Unless no grownups showed up ... in which case he and all his friends would die and he would make a point of haunting Olivia Kolumbiko and Rodney Montague for the rest of their lives.

But as he moved next to Quirrell and looked into the cursed Mirror, Harry was surprised to see that the image was not he was expecting. His heart's desire no longer reflected him as a loving and loyal member of the Potter clan. Instead, the image was a reflection of his current self sitting comfortably on the Hydra Throne which now recognized him as Prince. The mirror version of Harry looked down at the real version with regal confidence ... that suddenly broke into a mischievous smirk. Then, Delilah, whose head had been outside of the Mirror's frame, twisted into view with a large crystalline stone in her mouth. She dropped the stone into Mirror-Harry's waiting hand and hissed a coquettish laugh. Mirror-Harry slipped the Philosopher's Stone into his trouser pocket and winked ... and Harry's own trouser

pocket suddenly bulged as new weight was added to it. Harry's eyes widened.

*"They hid the Stone in the Mirror in such a way that only someone who didn't actually want to possess it could draw it back out again," he thought in wonder. "And it never occurred to them that Quirrell might force an unwilling hostage to help him?! **I've got morons on my team!**"*

Quirrell must have noticed Harry's response. "What is it, Potter? What do you see?" he asked angrily.

"Um, I see myself. Dumbledore is, uh, shaking hands with me. I've won the House Cup." Inside, Harry was cringing. Usually, he was a *much* better liar than this, but he was so startled to have the object of Quirrell's desire suddenly dumped into his pocket that he froze and simply couldn't come up with anything convincing. He wasn't the only one who noticed.

"He liessss!" exclaimed that terrible hissing voice.

"Oh well, it was worth a try," thought Harry. Then, in a fluid motion, he popped out his wand, whirled it towards Quirrell's head, and yelled **"SONOROUS!"** as loudly as he could, making sure to emphasize the *first* syllable. The same high-pitched shriek that earned Harry his first detention erupted once more. The bound Gryffindors winced in pain, while Quirrell nearly doubled over, as Harry backed as quickly as he could towards the stairs.

"Stop him you fool!" cried the awful voice, and despite his pain, Quirrell sent a Banishing Charm in Harry's direction. It caught the boy with such force that he twisted around in midair and landed painfully face down on the floor. Then, Quirrell snapped his fingers, and a barrier of flame rose up at the top of the stairs, blocking Harry's escape.

"Pitiful child! Did you really you could strike me down with a weak attack like that?!" snarled Quirrell in anger.

Slowly, Harry rose with his back to the older wizard. "No," he coughed. "I really just wanted to make sure that you knew I could cast the Glass-Shattering Curse." As he spoke, he whirled around to face his enemy with his wand in one hand, its tip resting against the (fake) Philosopher's Stone that he held in the other. "Now, *Professor*, I believe you said earlier that it was time we had a chat. So ... let's chat. Otherwise, I shatter the Philosopher's Stone into a million pieces."

"You insolent *BRAT!*" screamed Quirrell. "Give me that Stone or I swear you and your friends will die in AGONY!"

"Oh will you SHUT UP, already!" yelled Harry right back. "I swear you were less annoying when you were stuttering! You have nothing to offer me now except threats to kill us all, and since you were going to kill us all anyway, those don't frighten me." Harry snickered almost contemptuously. "Besides, as a famous Muggle by the name of Winston Churchill once said: '*Never talk with a monkey when the organ-grinder is in the room.*' So zip it, and let your master speak."

Quirrell growled, but then the unearthly voice spoke up again. "**Let me ssspeak to the boy.**"

"Master," said Quirrell nervously. "You are not strong enough."

"**I am ssstrong enough for thisss.**" And with that, Quirrell straightened and began to unwrap the turban atop his head. Harry steeled himself for the sight of what, months earlier he'd imagined as a "doom pimple." The reality was far worse. As the last of the wrappings fell away,

Voldemort was revealed, a wrinkled hideous face of pure malice and hate, grafted onto the back of Quirrell's bald skull and reflected in the Mirror. Harry risked a quick glance at Voldemort while the Dark Lord's eyes were still unfocused. Then, he fixed his gaze on Quirrell's chest, focused on his limited Occlumency training, and resolved that, no matter what, he would not meet Voldemort's gaze. His life and that of all of his friends depended on Voldemort not seeing into Harry's mind. For their part, the Gryffindors seemed to have been rendered speechless with horror. "Voldemort," Jim whispered in shock.

"Sssee what I have become, Harry Potter. Sssee what your brother has done to me." hissed Voldemort.

"Are you expecting an apology? Besides, I don't plan to see any part of you. I know you're a Legilimens, so if it's all the same I'll just keep my attention on Professor Quirrell in case he tries anything we'll all regret."

"Ahh, you are indeed cunning, Harry Potter. Worthy of Slytherin House. And to think your foolish parents abandoned you to filthy Muggles and then rejected you again merely because of your Sssorting. Join me, Harry Potter. Sssit at my right hand and I will grant both vengeance against those have wronged you and powerssss beyond your imagination."

"Really? Because, you know, I can imagine *quite a lot* of power," Harry said, giving every impression of seriously considering Voldemort's offer.

"Harry, you can't!" cried Hermione.

"Don't listen to him, Harry!" exclaimed Neville.

"I always knew you were a dark wizard, you snake!" yelled Jim.

Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes at Jim's idiocy.

"Excuse me, will all the Gryffindors – and especially Jim – kindly *shut up*! The grownups are talking now!" Then, he turned his attention back to Quirrell while studiously avoiding eye contact with Voldemort. "Obviously, my lord, I would need some ... assurances," he said.

"Sssuch as..."

He took a deep breath and tried to think of something he could plausibly ask in order to keep Voldemort focused on talking instead of action. "Why did you attack Godric's Hollow on Halloween of 1981?"

Voldemort hesitated. **"Why would the answer to that question constitute ... assurance?"**

"Your actions that night have never made sense to me. You stunned James and Lily Potter and then tried to kill Jim. I can only assume that if you'd succeeded with him, you'd have killed me next. Certainly, I can't imagine any reason to go to such lengths kill one twin and leave the other alive, but it would definitely be reassuring if you could persuade me that you only want to kill Jim specifically and not me as well. Also, to be honest, that night marked the exact moment my life started to suck, so I think I'm entitled to know."

The Dark Lord laughed in a way that reminded Harry of Niddhogg. **"You intrigue me, Potter. Very well. There wasss ... a prophecy..."**

"What? What prophecy?" asked Jim in confusion.

Quirrell turned his head slightly, and Harry realized it was so that Voldemort could look at Jim. **"They never even told you? How amussing! 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the ssseventh month diesss...' That much of the prophecy was overheard by one of my Death Eaters and passed on to me."**

"Which Death Eater?" Harry asked so he'd know who to kill later.

Voldemort laughed. **"Your illustrious potions instructor, of course."** Harry's blood ran cold at that. He'd had some professors he liked more than others, but Snape was the closest thing to a mentor he'd had. Off to the side, Hermione gasped in shock while Jim and Ron both cursed Snape's name. Neville made no sound, but a dark intensity came into his eyes. Voldemort ignored them all. As Harry had hoped, the Dark Lord couldn't resist a monologue.

"Initially, I wanted to pay a visit to St. Mungo's on August 1st and simply ssslay every child in the nursery, but sssome of my followers persuaded me that it would be ... counterproductive to commit violence on sssuch a ssscale. In time, I narrowed the potential candidates to you, your brother and the Longbottom Heir, but by then, both of your familiesss had already passed under the Fidelius Charm. I was quite harsh with those who persuaded me to delay. Luckily, just daysss before that fateful Halloween, a new recruit came to me and revealed that he was the Potter's Sssecret Keeper. The rest, as they say, is hisstory. I only refrained from killing your parents immediately because I feared there might be wards to detect the Killing Curse as there are here at

Hogwarts and did not wish to alert Dumbledore prior to ssslaying you and your brother. Besides, they did defy me in the past, and I wanted them to live long enough to sssuffer from the knowledge that they had failed to protect their children. In any case, the events of that Halloween proved rather conclusively that Jim Potter is the one with the power to vanquish me. Doubtless, that wasss the reason your parents abandoned you in favor of him. You have nothing to fear from me, Harry Potter, and if you give the Stone to me, you will be well-rewarded."

Harry's mind churned at the implications of what Voldemort said. A prophecy? And Snape was the one who revealed it to Voldemort? And the Secret Keeper?

"Hang on a minute. The Secret Keeper came to you in late October? But Sirius Black's confession said that he'd served you secretly for years!"

"Sssirius Black?" Voldemort asked in what sounded like confusion. In fact, it sounded so much like confusion that Harry forgot himself and looked at Voldemort's face - and the Dark Lord did seem genuinely confused. Then, Harry realized that Voldemort and he were looking into each other's eyes. *Then*, he realized from Voldemort's expression of mounting fury that he had read Harry's mind and learned the Stone in his hand was a fake. *And then*, Harry did the only thing he could think of - he shot Quirinus Quirrell in the face with a round of fireworks.

"NOW!" he yelled over the loud popping and the sound of Quirrell's screams.

At that, Theo and Blaise darted around the giant mirror they'd hidden behind while Harry distracted Quirrell.

Instantly, they fired off their strongest Finites at the Gryffindors whose bonds quickly evaporated. At their urging, Hermione, Neville and Ron ran for the stairs, the top of which was still on fire. Blaise and Theo followed them, but Jim, to Harry's surprise and consternation actually *charged* at Quirrell. At the last second (and with a loud "Kaai!"), he dropped and slid into Quirrell, kicking the man forcefully right on the side of the kneecap which then gave way with an audible snap, causing the man to fall to the floor with a scream of pain.

Atop the stairs, the other five students desperately cast the Water-Summoning Charm at the blaze, but the weak streams of water they produced were not enough to quench the fires. Then, Hermione turned to Neville.

"Neville! Remember what it was like the day you first tried the Levitation Charm with your father's wand! Remember how it felt ... like shoving your magic through a brick!"

Neville looked at Hermione in confusion for a second but then suddenly realized what she meant. He nodded, pointed at the flames and yelled "**AGUAMENTI!**" ... but without releasing the spell. Instead of a blast of water, there was a small blue sphere that materialized at the end of his wand, a bubble full of bubbling, frothing water. And as Neville's face contorted with pain, it slowly began to grow.

Down in the Mirror Chamber, Harry got over his surprise at Jim's martial arts antics and acted. "**PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!**" Instantly, Quirrell's arms and legs locked together. Quirrell himself could no longer speak except to whimper in pain from the burns on his face and what was probably a dislocated knee, but Voldemort was still shouting invectives. With a sick feeling, Harry realized that they had no way to fight Voldemort if he abandoned his host and

sought to possess someone else. "JIM! We have got to get OUT OF HERE!" he yelled.

Atop the stairs, Neville's legs were shaking and his vision was starting to blur, but at the tip of his wand was a bubble of water more than two feet across. Unable to contain it any longer, Neville released the overpowered spell and a massive flood of water poured out across the flames extinguishing them. The force of the water would have knocked Neville all the way back down the stairs had Ron, Theo and Blaise not caught him and supported him as he unleashed the spell. They were also able to catch him when his eyes fluttered and he passed out from the strain. Hermione darted down the stairs and screamed for Harry and Jim.

Down below, Harry had just grabbed hold of Jim (who had been reduced to the surprisingly effective habit of repeatedly kicking the prone Quirrell in the head) with the intention of physically dragging him from the room when a burst of concussive force erupted from the fallen man's body, knocking them both flat onto their backs. Quirrell's body then rose up into the air, and there was a painful crack as his arms forced themselves to splay out despite the paralyzing spell.

Quirrell screamed. "Master! NO! I have served you faithfully!"

"Worthless INSSSECT! An entire YEAR wasted on this fool's errand when the Ssstone was never even here at all! Now, sssuffer the price for your failure, Quirrell!"

Quirrell's head jerked to the right, and he screamed in agony. Then, it *kept on* turning. The scream abruptly

stopped, replaced by the sound of breaking bones and snapping tendons as Quirrell's head rotated a full 180 degrees so that Voldemort's face was now the front. He gestured towards the stairwell and snarled **"BOMBARDA!"** Blaise narrowly managed to grab Hermione and drag her back up the stairs as the explosive curse struck the ceiling and caused it to collapse down and block the stairs. As he tried to shake off the pain, Harry could still hear Hermione calling his name. Then, he felt a powerful force lift him up off the ground and slam his body into a wall. From the sharp yelp of pain he heard, it seemed that his brother had been slammed against the wall right next to him.

"Wonderful. Jim and I get to die together. How ... poetic." Harry struggled against the force that constrained him as he realized that he and Jim were pinned against a wall and suspended several feet above the ground. Then, to his horror, he saw Voldemort still riding Quirrell's mutilated corpse and floating over to the two boys.

"A year wasted, and now I have but ssseconds before this body is ussseless to me. My spirit shall endure, though. I defy the Prophecy even as I defy Death itself. But before I lose corporeal form, I still have time enough ssslay the Boy-Who-Lived ... and his meddlesome brother too! You once resisted the Killing Curse, Jim Potter. Let us see if you are immune to a more conventional means of execution!"

With that, the Dark Lord grasped each Potter by the throat and began to choke the life out of them. The pain at Harry's neck was made worse by a sudden stabbing agony from the small scar on his brow, and he heard Jim scream in pain as well. The two boys both clawed feebly at the man's arms to no avail. Spots started to appear before Harry's eyes, and

he grew dizzy. Then, out of instinct, Harry reached out with his hand and tried to claw at Voldemort's eyes. Jim did the same. As Harry's vision faded, he suddenly became aware of a faint sizzling sound, almost like bacon frying, followed instantly by an agonized scream. Then, unconsciousness claimed Harry Potter. His last coherent thought as he fell to the ground was the sensation of a powerful and malevolent force passing through his body on its way out of the room, a force that claimed the power to defy death and that hungered for revenge against both the Potter Twins. Then, nothing but darkness.

Questions, Answers & Unexpected Profanity

CHAPTER 31: Questions, Answers and Unexpected Profanity

At first, the light was so bright, Harry was afraid he had died and gone to heaven. Then, his vision cleared and he realized it was just the infirmary. "Good morning, Mr. Potter!" exclaimed Madame Pomfrey, the painfully cheerful school nurse. The last time he'd seen the woman, she'd harangued him for being so foolish as to blow out his eardrums by casting a sonic curse at his own head, but she seemed much friendlier today. Perhaps it was because this time his wounds weren't self-inflicted.

Harry slowly sat up and noticed his glasses and his wand on the bedside table. Donning the former, he saw that there were a surprising number of gifts and get-well cards on the table both from various Slytherins and his friends from other houses. Then, he saw that Jim was in the next bed over, still asleep (or possibly comatose – Harry had no way of knowing) and with an equally large assortment of gifts from his own fan club. Harry reached over for a Cauldron Cake and said, "Good morning to you as well, Madame Pomfrey. I don't suppose you can tell me how I got here. Last thing I recall, I was being choked to death by the animated corpse of my Defense instructor."

The nurse stared at him. "That's a rather ... lurid description, Mr. Potter. You and your brother were brought in early Friday morning, along with several of your friends." He looked concerned at that, but she was quick to reassure him. "Everyone else only suffered from some minor cuts and

bruises and was right as rain and sent back to their dorms within the hour. You and your twin, however, were comatose for several days. Some strange form of magical shock. Your vital signs were fine, and you both came out of your comas last night, but as bed rest was still prescribed, you were both left to sleep until you woke up on your own. Incidentally, today is Monday, June 8th. Now, any other questions you have should best be answered by the Headmaster or your parents, all of whom I have summoned."

Harry frowned at that but figured it would be unavoidable. He briefly considered whether he should insist that Snape be present as well, as was his right under the injunction his solicitor had filed. Then, he remembered what Voldemort had revealed. That Snape had been a Death Eater. That Snape was the one who told Voldemort about the Prophecy. That Snape, as much as Dumbledore, the Potters, or the Dark Lord, had inflicted 4 Privet Drive on him.

"One last question, please? Do you happen to know the outcome of the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw match that was scheduled for last Friday?" he asked.

She shook her head sadly as she looked over at Jim. "The Gryffindors had to move a Chaser to cover Jim's spot and played a man down the whole game. It was the worst defeat for the Gryffindors in 300 years, they say."

Harry smiled. "I'm sorry I missed it," he said softly as Madame Pomfrey returned to her office.

"I'll bet you are," Jim sighed from the next bed, as he struggled to sit up.

"Oh, cheer up, Little Brother. There's always next year. Maybe I'll make the Slytherin team, and we'll have a whole

new arena in which to hate each other." As he spoke, he reached over for a small box with a card that read *"You'll probably be needing this. B.Z."* Inside, he found a small mirror and a fresh tube of Sleekeazy. Delighted, he immediately started primping his rat's nest of a head into something more presentable.

Jim didn't rise to Harry's taunts. Instead, he stayed quiet for a while before finally asking, "Was there ever a moment when you were actually considering joining ... You-Know-Who?"

"What, Voldemort?" said Harry, enjoying the sight of Jim flinching at the name as he carefully adjusted some stray hairs. "Heh. Some Boy-Who-Lived you are. You can't even say your arch-enemy's name. And no, I would never join Voldemort. If anything, I want to destroy him more than you do. He's one of five people responsible for ensuring that I spent ten years of absolute misery with the Dursleys, and of those five, he's the only one I'd be legally allowed to kill."

Jim was startled by how casually Harry talked about killing Voldemort. He knew he was expected to "vanquish" the Dark Lord, but somehow he'd never internalized that word as a synonym for "kill." For some reason, he recalled his very first conversation with Harry, in which he'd bragged about how his brother could handle running House Potter's business affairs while the Boy-Who-Lived focused on "fighting bad guys." Now that he knew exactly what "fighting bad guys entailed," he shivered at how naive and arrogant he'd been. He turned back to his brother and narrowed his eyes. "Who are the other four?" asked he suspiciously.

Harry snickered but didn't answer. "Not to change the subject, but ... well, I'm changing the subject. What was up

with your strategy of repeatedly kicking Quirrell in such a wonderfully Muggle way? You said you'd had years of special training to prepare you for something like that. I assumed it had been magical training. Are you a wizard or not?"

Jim looked away. The fact that he'd been rendered so helpless so easily, that he'd been reduced to nothing more than bait to ensure *Harry's* presence, and that Harry had been so much more ... competent at confronting Voldemort all rankled at him terribly. "I'm a wizard who wasn't allowed to legally own a wand before the age of eleven, snake. My ... our mother insisted that I learn self-defense. I'd only been taking martial arts classes for a year or so though and ... kind of got out of practice since I got to Hogwarts." He looked back to his brother. "That won't happen again," he said with determination.

Before Harry could reply, the doors to the infirmary opened, and the Headmaster entered, along with the Potters and Snape. Jim wasn't sure but he thought he'd heard Harry mutter "*Speak of the devils.*"

"Good morning, Jim. Good morning, Harry. How are you both feeling this morning?" Dumbledore seemed chipper, but Harry assumed it was an act. A year's worth of work and nothing to show for it except the Boy-Who-Lived nearly getting choked to death couldn't have the old man feeling very happy. Then again, depending on what happened to Voldemort's spirit after the two passed out, he supposed it was possible that the old man felt happy indeed. For their part, the Potters quickly rushed to Jim and embraced him, but they at least had the decency (or perhaps the gall) to look apologetic about the fact that they weren't embracing him as well.

"Stupid and useless is how I feel," said Jim dejectedly. "I'm sorry. I should never have gone down to the Chamber, let alone dragged my friends down there. I don't know what I was thinking."

"I believe your brother can answer that," said Dumbledore, whose eyes were twinkling. Harry assumed there was something unnatural about that, so he tried to avoid direct eye contact as much as possible. "After all, it was he who answered Professor Quirrell's summons to the Mirror Chamber after you and your friends had been captured, but not before he passed on a transcription of their conversation to a prefect who then delivered it to the faculty."

Harry looked over at his brother with a bland expression and sighed. "He used a Confundus Curse on all four of you. The Defense exam you took the other day carried a spell that would compel you all to try to protect the Philosopher's Stone once you learned the Headmaster had left school grounds."

Jim was confused. "But why? Why didn't he just try to take the Stone himself?"

"He couldn't," Harry replied. "The Stone was placed in the Mirror in such a way that only someone who had the desire to protect the Stone from Voldemort could actually remove it. Not that it was ever the real Philosopher's Stone to begin with. That whole story was a sham concocted as a lure for Quirrell and his master. I assume the Mirror also had some particularly useful benefit when used against a possessing spirit like Voldemort's." The Potters flinched reflexively at the name, but Harry couldn't bring himself to care. "After all, that would have been a very roundabout way of dealing

with the situation if it had just been Quirrell you were worried about."

"Quite so, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I do hope you don't mind if I call you Harry, given how many other people named Potter are in the room." Harry shrugged while suppressing the urge to ask if he could call the Headmaster *Albus*. "While the Mirror can bewitch mortal minds, its original purpose was to safely free victims of possession from their inhabiting spirits. Initially, it was quite effective, much more so than traditional methods of exorcism. Such ghosts and other malicious spirits would naturally be drawn into the Mirror and trapped in an hallucinatory dreamscape in which all their hopes and dreams were fulfilled, leaving their hosts alive and unharmed. Eventually, after all of its worldly desires had been satiated, the spirit would dissipate."

"Unfortunately, over the years, the sheer number of evil spirits and angry ghosts absorbed by the Mirror twisted it and gave it a hunger for the souls of the living as well. It gained a limited self-awareness, as well as the power to entrance the living as well as the dead with images of their deepest, most primal wants. An unwary observer might stand in front of the Mirror enraptured until his body wasted away and his still living soul slipped loose from his body to be consumed. Once the artifact's darker properties were identified, it was removed from use and retired to the Department of Mysteries for study, and I had to pull a great many strings to secure it as a trap for Voldemort. Our plan was that Quirrell would attempt to secure the Stone from the Mirror only for Voldemort's soul fragment to be trapped and consumed by it instead." The Headmaster grimaced. "Obviously, that plan was unsuccessful."

"What went wrong?" asked Jim.

"Me," said Harry flatly without looking at any of the others. "I figured out the truth back in November, both about the Stone and about Voldemort. Professor Snape here advised me that Voldemort might be able to learn what I knew through Legilimency and that I should avoid looking at Quirrell. Apparently, I wasn't subtle enough about it. He didn't learn what I knew, but he did realize that I knew something, and so he started using Legilimency on my Gryffindor friends and eventually on Jim. That let him know that the Mirror was the real trap and that I'd beaten it. Quirrell and Voldemort lured you and the others through the gauntlet in order to get me to come after you all. After he saw your memory of last Christmas, there was no way that Voldemort would expose himself directly to the Mirror."

Jim absorbed all that. Not only had his Slytherin brother come to save everyone, they had only been put in danger in the first place due to Harry figuring out everything months ago while he was stumbling around in the dark. Well, that and his childish actions at Christmas. He'd followed Harry and Theo to the Mirror Room hoping to get them in trouble. Instead, he'd unwittingly learned the very information Voldemort needed to evade Dumbledore's trap. He shook his head, unwilling to follow that line of thought any farther.

"By the way," interrupted Jim. "Snape's a Death Eater. You know, just in case anyone's interested."

The Potters looked at each other pensively, while Snape snorted contemptuously towards Jim. Finally, Dumbledore spoke. "When *Professor* Snape was a young man, he made some unfortunate mistakes, mistakes he has worked diligently to correct. All I can tell you beyond that is that Professor Snape has my complete confidence. I trust that will be sufficient for you both."

Jim nodded slowly. Harry merely looked at Dumbledore before changing the subject. "Speaking of trust, I don't suppose that you'd be inclined to tell us the *whole* prophecy now that we know it exists."

"Alas, I cannot. While Voldemort knows how the Prophecy begins, he does not know its entirety, and there is information contained within the whole Prophecy which could still be of great value to him. I had held out hope that you, Jim, could be kept unaware of the Prophecy completely for a while longer. There are ... burdens that will come with complete knowledge of it, burdens that I had wanted to spare you. I had hoped to see that you could enjoy at least a little more of your childhood..." He stopped as he sensed Harry stiffen and realized his faux pas. From what Severus had said, the elder twin's "childhood" ended sometime around the age of four. He took a deep breath and then persevered.

"In any case, Jim, I understand that your brother, Harry, has undertaken a study of Occlumency. If your parents approve, I would recommend that you do likewise. I will reveal the rest of the Prophecy when and only when I am satisfied that you can defend your mind against intrusions from Voldemort and others." He turned to the other brother.

"The same applies to you, Harry. I believe your actions have earned you the right to know the contents of the Prophecy, which I will make available to you once you have completed your own Occlumency training."

That surprised Harry, as well as James Potter. Neither parent looked happy at the idea of Jim studying Occlumency, and James looked like he was about to openly object to either boy learning any more about the prophecy. He gave up when Lily elbowed him sharply in the ribs. Harry pretended not to notice. "Can you at least tell us

what happened to Voldemort ... you know, after I passed out. I remember the sound of Quirrell – well, Voldemort by that point, I guess – screaming and a burning smell, and then, nothing."

"I killed him, didn't I?" interrupted Jim suddenly. "The ... anomaly ... thing ... anyway, whatever it was that let me destroy Voldemort's body back when I was a baby kicked in again and destroyed him. And Quirrell." He looked down at that. Harry was reminded that only a few weeks earlier, he had been relieved to have not started a body count at the age of eleven. But while he had some sympathy for his brother's plight, he also knew that he would not have hesitated to destroy Voldemort and/or Quirrell if he'd had the actual power to do so. He may have shown mercy to Draco Malfoy, but he'd spent way too much time talking with Niddhogg to be either squeamish or sentimental where the Dark Lord was concerned.

"No, son, you didn't," said James reassuringly to his favored son. "Quirrell was already dead by his master's hand. And even if things had played out differently, Quirrell would have died as soon as You-Know-Who's spirit abandoned his body. It appears that the possession was a voluntary one. Quirrell's will may have been overcome before it started, but by the time he got to Hogwarts, he was a willing host. And a willing host always dies when the possessing spirit departs. You're not responsible for Quirrell's death."

"Unfortunately," said Harry somewhat acerbically, "you're not responsible for Voldemort's death either." He turned to look at Dumbledore. "I'm right, aren't I? He *is* still out there, if only in a spiritual form. How long will it take him to find another way to restore himself?"

Dumbledore sighed tiredly. "We don't know, Harry. We are not even sure how he maintains his existence. There are several methods that allow the soul to remain tied to the material world even after death of the body, all of which utilize the darkest of magics, but we are not yet certain which method he used, always assuming he didn't invent some entirely new and monstrous technique completely unknown to us. I believe that it will take him some time to recover from the events of last Thursday night, but I cannot say how long it will be nor can I predict by what means he will next seek to achieve physicality. We can only remain vigilant and do what we can to prepare."

"For my own part," he continued somewhat sadly, "I can only offer you both my apologies. Our plan took great risks but offered great rewards – the total destruction of Lord Voldemort at a time when he was still at his weakest. That the plan should have failed through a series of unfortunate and unforeseeable coincidences is ... profoundly disappointing. I hope you can both forgive me for my own lack of foresight." Jim said that, of course, he would, while Harry nodded noncommittally.

"Now, my understanding is that Madam Pomfrey wishes to give each of you a final check-up, after which you will be released. Lunch is in one hour, and the Leaving Feast will be this evening." He chuckled softly. "Who knows? There might be some special last minute points to be granted." His eyes twinkled at that, and Harry resolved to study over the summer and find out whether "twinkling eyes" was a sign of some malicious but subtle psychic attack.

"If it's all the same, sir," said Harry, reclining with his eyes closed as if he had grown weary. "I'd prefer that Theo, Blaise and I *not* receive any points as a result of what happened, especially if the Boy-Who-Lived and three other

Gryffindors get points out of the same event. It would cause a lot of Slytherins to ask ... difficult questions and possibly complicate our position within the House. There are too many Slytherins still who were raised to have Death Eater sympathies ... as I'm sure Jim and Lord Potter would happily agree." If there was the tiniest amount of snideness in that last bit, neither Dumbledore nor Snape commented on it and none of the others even noticed it. "Also, I've rather firmly staked out the position in the House that Voldemort is dead with a capital-D and that Slytherin House should move on from his influence, and it would be better for us if there were no rumors floating around to the contrary. Certainly no rumors that we three helped prevent his resurrection."

Dumbledore glanced over at Snape, who nodded slightly. "Very well, Harry. No points will be awarded to the involved Slytherin students."

"If the Slytherins aren't getting any points, then ... I don't think the Gryffindors should either," said Jim suddenly. "It's ... not right for us to get points for getting Confunded into a trap if the people who came to rescue us aren't rewarded for it."

"As you wish, Jim," said Dumbledore with a soft smile. "Well, if that is all, I must be going. Much to do before the Leaving Feast. Although I would appreciate it, James, if you would join me in my office to discuss a few small matters." The auror nodded.

After the adults had left, the two boys sat in silence, each looking over the cards and gifts they'd received from well-wishers. Jim looked thoughtful for a few minutes. Then, he suddenly stiffened as a cold feeling entered the pit of his stomach. He sat up and looked over at Harry.

"Why did you refuse House points?" he asked in a clipped tone.

Harry looked over at in surprise. "I already explained that."

"I know you did. And it made sense. That's that doesn't mean it's the real reason."

Harry barked out a surprised laugh. "You're improving, Little Brother. One day, you might even see through one of my plots as its unfolding instead of afterwards. Slytherin won the Quidditch Cup. With the addition of those points – and assuming nothing else changed over the weekend while we were unconscious – Slytherin now leads Gryffindor in the House Cup race by at least thirty points. There were three Slytherins and four Gryffindors involved in last Thursday's monkey business, so if the Headmaster gave all seven of us the same number of points and the per-person award was more than thirty (which seems reasonable for fighting *Voldemort himself*), Dumbledore's 'last minute award' might have put Gryffindor in the lead."

"And you just assumed that if you declined to accept House points, I would automatically do the same."

"Of course. You're a Gryffindor."

Jim slammed his head back into his pillow, fuming.

"I *hate* Slytherins so much."

"So I've heard," said Harry smugly as he opened up another Cauldron Cake.

Soon after, James and Dumbledore were seated in the Headmaster's office. James noticed that his old mentor's eyes were decidedly not twinkling.

"What would you like to talk about, Albus?" he asked somewhat tightly.

"James, this has to stop. Thus far, I have respected your legal authority over Harry as his Head of House even after learning how flagrantly you have abused that authority over the past ten years. Moreover, the laws of the Wizengamot have thus far compelled me to do so, despite my increasing apprehension at the rift between Harry and the rest of your family. In any case, Harry's decision to have me recuse myself from any legal proceedings involving him has largely made the matter moot. That said, he is my student, one for whom I have failed to fulfill my obligations as Headmaster. I can no longer condone what Severus rightly describes as 'senseless antagonism' towards the boy."

James bristled. "I'm afraid I must reject that characterization, sir."

"Which part? You don't recognize it as antagonism? Or you actually claim that there's some sense to it?"

"With respect, Albus, you know that as Head of House Potter, my authority over Harry's upbringing trumps your authority as Headmaster. And so long as I fulfill my obligations to my Heir Presumptive, neither you nor anyone else has any business questioning any of my parental decisions."

The room got noticeably colder at that, and Potter had to struggle to maintain eye contact with Dumbledore, who was now giving him *The Look*. Not the "*I'm disappointed*" look he'd used on the Marauders when they'd exceeded his patience for pranks. But rather, ***The Look***. The one that let everyone know the dotty old man had left the building and the Defeater of Grindewald had taken his place. The one

James had only ever seen him use when confronting Death Eaters and Voldemort himself. Potter was stunned to realize that Dumbledore might actually now consider him to be an enemy due to his treatment of Harry.

"I am well aware of my stringent limitations as Headmaster where Wizengamot Lords and their heirs are concerned, Lord Potter. They are the same limitations that your peer, Lord Tiberius Nott, uses to sanctify *his* conduct as well." James was shocked to be compared to the notorious Death Eater. It felt like a slap to the face. "However, it occurs to me that those limitations do not apply when I am acting in my capacity as Chief Warlock. Thus far, I have acquiesced to Harry's motion to recuse because, frankly, I agreed that there is a conflict of interest. After all, it was my mistake which led to his erroneously being declared a squib, and it was my recommendation that you integrate him as quickly as possible into Muggle society that led to his placement with the Dursleys ... although I certainly never anticipated that you would *ignore the boy completely* for ten years without making the slightest inquiries into his health."

"We *did* place protections," said James testily. "I bought a house across the street for Arabella Figg to live in so she could watch over the boy and let us know if anything was wrong."

Dumbledore gave him *The Look* again. "Well, James, that worked out splendidly, didn't it? Regardless, recusal is generally at the Chief Warlock's discretion. If I reverse my prior decision on that topic, Harry's solicitor would need to bring the matter before the entire Wizengamot in order to force me to recuse myself ... though she may be elect not to do so once it becomes clear that I am inclined to rule in the boy's favor."

Potter's eyes widened. "You wouldn't."

"I assure you, Lord Potter," said Dumbledore coldly, "that I have seen more than enough in the past year to support a finding that you have been an unfit guardian to the Heir Presumptive of your House. As such, it is within my legal power as Chief Warlock to revoke your authority over Harry completely and appoint a custodial guardian until he comes of age. I imagine Augusta Longbottom would be delighted to accept Harry into her household." Then, he smiled, though there was still no twinkle in his eyes. "In fact, Harry seems remarkably mature for his age, don't you agree? I can easily see myself amenable to a petition for emancipation for Harry as early as, say, thirteen? Emancipation followed swiftly by elevation from Heir Presumptive to Heir Apparent?"

"NO! YOU CAN'T!" James shot up out of his chair as he shouted at the old men, who sat unmoved.

"Then give me a reason not to. Give me some sign that you can finally be a decent father to your son."

James looked around for a moment as if lost. Then, he sat back down again slowly as the energy drained out of him. "I ... I can't. It's too late. My last chance to be Harry's father ended the night he was Sorted."

"But ... *why?*! I admit I was concerned at first when Harry was Sorted into Slytherin House, but the past year has erased nearly all of my reservations. He hasn't been dragged into the dark by the other Slytherins as I feared. If anything, he is pulling them back into the light. He knowingly and willingly went to face *Voldemort* without any of the expectations of Jim's magical protections in order to save his Gryffindor friends, *and the sons of Tiberius Nott*

and Serena Zabini willingly accompanied him!"

Dumbledore sighed. "James, I am committed to spending the last years of my life helping Jim defeat Voldemort, a daunting, seemingly impossible task. But those difficulties are *nothing* compared to the task of breaking the hold that centuries of Pureblood ideology and reckless bigotry have held over Slytherin House, over one quarter of our student body. I never dared *dream* that I would live to see a Slytherin like Harry who brings together the children of Death Eaters and the children of Muggles. I never dared to hope that such a thing was even possible!"

With that, Dumbledore studied James's face and noticed that he had only become more distraught. "And yet, for some reason, that thought ... horrifies you." He shook his head. "I don't understand, James. As a student, you were kind and friendly, if a little rambunctious, to everyone save those of Salazar's House to whom you showed relentless hatred. Like your father before you. Like his father before *him*. Why, James? Why is it so unthinkable for a Potter to not only join Slytherin House, but to excel and to bring forth its best qualities rather than its worst."

James closed his eyes and leaned his head back, as if beaten down by his mentor's words. Finally, he spoke in flat, broken voice. "I'll need you to swear an Unbreakable Vow."

"What?" Dumbledore asked, confused at the non sequitur.

"You asked me a question. I'll say this for now. My ... antagonism towards Harry ... is not senseless. It is purposeful. If you want to know what that purpose is, I'll need you to swear an Unbreakable Vow of secrecy to never reveal it."

Dumbledore stared at his former student and now his young friend for a long time. Then, he pulled out his wand slowly and took the oath Potter demanded. Several minutes later, most of the paintings of former Headmasters which adorned Albus Dumbledore's office looked on in shock and surprise. In the forty years that the man had served as Headmaster of Hogwarts, none of them had ever heard the man swear so loudly or profanely.

The Death Eater Snape

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

CHAPTER 32: The Death Eater Snape

That afternoon, Severus Snape returned from lunch to find two students sitting in their usual seats in his classroom. The presence of Harry Potter wasn't surprising. The presence of Neville Longbottom was. In fact, it was oddly discomfiting. "Mr. Potter. Mr. Longbottom. What brings you to my classroom on this fine summer day? Exams are over. You have no business here."

Harry spoke calmly but intently. "On the very first day of class, sir, I noted that there were some things that should be addressed immediately rather than just allowed to ... fester. The issue that Jim raised in the infirmary regarding you is, we believe, one such matter."

Snape scoffed. "You refer to his accusation that I am a former Death Eater? The Headmaster already responded to that. I would advise you to accept his statement on the subject and move on."

Harry pierced him with his gaze, as if daring him to use Legilimency. To his surprise, Snape could feel the beginnings of a basic Occlumency shield. It was nothing he could not penetrate with ease, but it was still impressive that the boy had come so far in seven months. Despite the invitation, Snape did not enter Harry's mind, and finally the boy spoke.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him... born as the seventh month dies..." The Dark Lord likes the sound of his own voice, as you're no doubt aware."

"Ahhh," said Snape. "I see."

Neville said nothing during all this. He simply let Harry do the talking while he regarded the Potions Master impassively.

"The Death Eater who revealed those words to You-Know-Who is partially responsible for ten years of hell for me. He is also partially responsible for the loss of Neville's parents and his delivery into the hands of a greedy bastard who tried repeatedly to murder him. Neville and I are both of the opinion that we are entitled to a clearer picture of how the Dark Lord gained that information."

Snape turned up his nose haughtily. *"Entitled, you say?"*

"Yes, sir," Neville finally spoke. "Entitled."

A hundred biting, cutting remarks flew through Snape's head. Hateful remarks about dunderheads and arrogant brats who needed to learn their place. About how there was still time in the year to have them scrubbing cauldrons, about how Harry Potter was just as arrogant as his father, as arrogant as any Gryffindor. But he said none of those things ... because just as he was about to open his mouth to unleash his anger on the two boys, he was suddenly transfixed by a pair of green eyes staring intently at him. Green eyes which he hadn't thought of in years but which now were suddenly thrust to the forefront of his memory. Green eyes that contained within their depths a righteous fury only barely contained by a strong moral code and a growing confidence that was finally blossoming after ten

years of being trampled upon. But more than that, green eyes that held compassion for Severus Snape and a genuine desire to forgive him of his sins if only the professor would give the boy permission to do so.

In short, Neville Longbottom had his father's eyes.

Then...

"I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!"

Lily blinked.

"Fine," she said coolly. 'I won't bother in future. And I'd wash your pants if I were you, Snivellus."

"Apologise to Evans!" James roared at Snape, his wand pointed threateningly at him.

"I don't want you to make him apologise," Lily shouted, rounding on James. "You're as bad as he is."

"What?" yelped James. "I'd NEVER call you a - you-know-what!"

"Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you've just got off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid Snitch, walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can - I'm surprised your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat head on it. You make me SICK."

She turned on her heel and hurried away.

"Evans!" James shouted after her. "Hey, EVANS!"

But she didn't look back.

"What is it with her?" said James, trying and failing to look as though this was a throwaway question of no real importance to him.

"Reading between the lines, I'd say she thinks you're a bit conceited, mate," said Sirius.

"Right," said James, who looked furious now, "right -"

There was another flash of light, and Snape was once again hanging upside-down in the air.

"Who wants to see me take off Snivelly's pants?" [1]

"EXPELLIARMUS HORRIBILIS!"

With that, there was a truly blinding flash of light, and all four Marauders were suddenly knocked prone with each of their wands flying away to land at the spellcaster's feet. Snape dropped towards the ground and then stopped a foot above it before gently floating down the rest of the way. After pulling his robes back down, Severus looked towards his new savior. It was a tall, powerfully built Gryffindor with dirty blonde hair, piercing green eyes that were burning in anger, and a pin on his chest that identified him as Head Boy.

"Please stay on the ground, Mr. Snape, and refrain from casting any spells until this is resolved," said Frank Longbottom calmly, but without taking his eyes off the Marauders.

"Longbottom!" yelled Sirius Black. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"The Fifth Year prefect's job, since the one we have obviously isn't up to it." Remus looked shamefaced at that.

"Everybody else! The show's over! Clear off back to the dorms!" All of the other students who had been watching the confrontation quickly left rather than risk the Head Boy's wrath.

"Sticking up for the Junior Death Eaters now, Frank?" asked a still-angry James Potter as the four boys rose to their feet.

"When it's four-on-one. Although I do give you some credit. At least you're bullying another Fifth Year. Usually, it's the Second Year Slytherins you like to toy with."

"Fine, whatever. How many points are you taking?" asked Sirius as he rolled his eyes.

Frank snorted. "Now what would be the point of that, Black, now that exams are over and there's less than a week left in school? We're already in *last place* and over a hundred points away from winning the Cup, and it's mainly because of you worthless little swots. You don't give a damn about house points. You don't even care about detentions. But apparently, you *do* seem to like the idea of hanging people upside down and debagging them for cheap laughs. Well, you know what? I've finished my NEWTS and I already have a post-graduate job lined up, so I don't really mind pissing off McGonagall at this point. So how about we skip the official punishment system? I'll just leave the four of you hanging upside-down out here in the courtyard with your willies flapping in the breeze like you planned for Snape and see if being a bully as much fun as you guys seem to think!"

He raised his wand, and the four stepped back, raising their hands in fear.

"Frank," said Remus nervously. "There's no need for this. Things got a little out of hand, but it's over now."

Frank sneered at Lupin with contempt. Then, he lowered his wand and fixed his gaze back on James. "You know, Potter. I'm not surprised by Black. I still don't know how he tricked the Hat into Sorting him into Gryffindor, but he's just like every other one of his sick relatives. He'll always be Walburga's boy."

"Why you sonuva- !" Sirius charged Frank, who lazily flicked out his wand in the boy's direction. There was another flash of light, and suddenly, Sirius was flat on his back ten feet away. Frank continued as if he'd barely noticed the interruption.

"But you, James? You're the *Potter Heir*! Your family has been Gryffindor for at least ten generations. When you were Sorted, I was *actually excited* to see a Potter at Hogwarts because I expected you to be the perfect symbol of our House. To show everyone else what Gryffindor courage and values are all about." Frank stepped forward and got right into James's face. "And for the past five years, there's hardly been a day you haven't been a complete embarrassment. You absolutely disgust me, James Potter. Now take your worthless self and your gang of bullies and get out of my sight."

With that, Longbottom stepped aside and gestured with his wand. A red-faced James Potter stooped to pick up his own wand and then stormed off, followed by his three friends. As they left, Longbottom called out.

"Oh, and Lupin? I doubt it will do any good, but for what it's worth, I plan to inform Professor McGonagall that I consider you completely unfit to be a prefect and that she should replace you. Preferably with someone who can walk around without his lips affixed to one of Potter's arse

cheeks. McClaggan maybe. He's a wanker, but at least he can think for himself. Just thought you ought to know."

Remus's face nearly crumpled at Frank's words, while James and Sirius gave Frank murderous looks. He smirked at them and gestured again with his wand for them to head along. Then, he turned back to Snape. "Are you injured, Mr. Snape? Do you need to go to the infirmary?"

Snape, who had been amazed at both the Head Boy's skill and his willingness to stand up to Potter's gang on his behalf, quickly shook his head. "No, Mr. Longbottom. I ... thank you for your intervention." To his embarrassment, the Slytherin sniffled.

Longbottom studied the young Slytherin for a few seconds. Then, to Snape's surprise, he sat down on the ground next to the other boy. "I'm sorry I didn't get here faster. But ... I did arrive in time to see that business with Evans. That was ... rough."

Severus tried to summon a sneer or an insult but was simply too broken down. Longbottom looked off into the distance silently for a few seconds.

"I interned with the DMLE last summer," he said, changing the subject. "Got to take a class on improving my observational skills and learning to read social cues. It was very interesting. I got an O." He turned back to the confused Snape. "I couldn't help but notice that when you called Evans a Mudblood, you weren't even looking at her. You weren't looking at Potter or his gang, either. You were looking off to the side, over to where Mulciber, Wilkes and Rosier were watching ... approvingly."

Snape remained silent. Frank hesitated for a second and then went on.

"I imagine it's pretty hard for you in Slytherin at times. Just being a Halfblood in Slytherin is hard enough, but to have a Muggleborn as your best friend? And worse, one you obviously have a crush on?" Snape's breath caught in his throat. "And then, in front of everyone, she *saves* you from Potter's gang in front of all your Slytherin peers. I imagine that would have made things ... intolerable if you'd just let it go."

Severus looked down at the ground, unable to meet Longbottom's eyes. He wanted to bluster and deny but found that he couldn't, not while under the gaze of someone who seemed to understand him without hating him. Unable to speak, he simply nodded at Frank's deductions.

"Do you think she'll forgive you?" he asked softly.

Snape hesitated. "I will go to her this summer and try to explain. That in a single instant, I had to choose between insulting my best friend or confirming to my house mates that I was a blood traitor fit to be hexed on an hourly basis for the next two years... But no, I do not think she will forgive me."

"Is there anything I can do, Severus?"

Snape looked up sharply at Longbottom's presumption of familiarity, but the look in his eyes stopped the Slytherin from saying something offensive. It wasn't the pity he'd been expecting. It was kindness, which was a wholly different thing that Snape had only rarely experienced from others.

He sighed. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble, I'd appreciate it if you'd make a big show of docking five points or so for calling Lily a Mudblood. Perhaps mention to one of

the Slytherin prefects how disgusted you are with my vile bigotry."

Frank laughed. "Sure thing."

"Thank you ... Frank."

Now...

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers and then looked up at Neville and Harry. He sighed in resignation and then began to speak.

"The first thing you must understand is that when I was young and foolish ... I was very young and foolish. The second thing you must understand that the early days of the last Wizarding War were a time of great confusion. While it was generally understood that the Dark Lord and his followers were motivated by a hatred of Muggleborns, a sizeable portion of the wizarding populace failed to appreciate just how violent and destructive they were. Likewise, at least in the early days, a great many people, including myself, failed to appreciate that the Dark Lord was genuinely a *Dark Lord* and not just some jumped up agitator the government wished to discredit. The Wizarding Wireless was still somewhat new and, in any case, owned and controlled by the Ministry, just like the Daily Prophet, our only major newspaper. And during that era, the Ministry strongly supported new rights and protections for Muggleborns and Muggles to a degree that even moderate witches and wizards found troubling. To make a long story short, a great many of my friends and peers from my school days believed that the worst accusations against the Dark Lord and his movement were propaganda meant to discredit him, that the atrocities the Death Eaters supposedly performed were fabrications or, worse, actual

atrocities performed by Muggleborns for which Voldemort and his followers were framed. That is not an uncommon tactic during times of civil insurrection. I believe the Muggles refer to it as 'false flag' operations. In fact, even the term 'Death Eaters' was first used in a Daily Prophet editorial as an insult against the organization formally known as "The Knights of Walpurgis," an insult the Dark Lord eventually coopted and turned to his own political uses."

"After graduating Hogwarts in 1978, I remained in contact with former Slytherin friends who joined the Dark Lord's inner circle. I returned to England in January of 1980 after obtaining my Potions Mastery in Italy. The skills I had obtained were some that would be extremely useful to the Death Eater movement, and they wished to recruit me. And while I had little use for their larger political agenda, a family matter that arose around that time made their offer attractive. You see, I am a Halfblood." Both Harry and Neville were startled by his blunt admission. "My father was a Muggle, but my mother was a witch from the now extinct Noble House of Prince. She was expelled from the family for marrying my father, a foolish and shortsighted decision by my grandfather as he had no other surviving heirs. Thus, when he died in 1979, the House of Prince was extinguished. However, my friends assured me that if I could prove my worth to the Dark Lord, he would reward me when he took power by legislatively reversing my mother's expulsion, thereby allowing me to claim the Prince seat and assets."

"It was against this backdrop that on a cold, January day in 1980, I found myself in the Hogs Head Inn in Hogsmeade. I had learned that Albus Dumbledore was meeting with an applicant for the recently vacated Divination Instructor's position, and I had hoped to meet with him myself and

present my credentials for the position of Potions Instructor, as I had heard rumors that Horace Slughorn was considering retirement. While waiting for Dumbledore to come out of the meeting room, I suddenly heard the woman inside cry out the beginnings of a prophecy, the same prophecy which the Dark Lord related to both of you. The owner of the bar caught me eavesdropping and, assuming I was deliberately spying on the Headmaster, threw me out. Although I knew there was more to the prophecy than what I'd heard, I believed, correctly, that relating what I did know to the Dark Lord would win me a place in his Inner Circle and, eventually I hoped, the Prince inheritance." He hesitated. "It goes without saying that when I met with the Dark Lord, I had no idea that either of your mothers was with child."

"But you did know you were sending You-Know-Who after a child though, right?" asked Neville in a tight voice. "Even if it hadn't been either of us, you were telling You-Know-Who to kill a child."

Severus chuckled bitterly. "As I said Mr. Longbottom, when I was young and foolish, I was very young and very foolish. In all honesty, when I revealed the partial prophecy to the Dark Lord, I had not considered for one second the possibility that it referred to an infant."

The two looked up at him in surprise. "What?!" asked Harry incredulously.

He shrugged. "I never took Divination, and in my hubris, I applied a layman's analysis to what I'd heard. Consider the words of the prophecy that you already know, Mr. Potter. *'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord **approaches**...*' The word 'approaches' in my mind clearly referred to someone who was some distance away

but drawing nearer. It is not a word that I would have ever used to describe a child in utero whose birth was still over seven months away. The phrase *'born as the seventh month dies'* obviously indicated a late July birth date but did not, in and of itself, imply that said birth was yet to come. As for the middle line - *'born to those who have thrice defied him'* - well, 'defy' is a rather vague term. Certainly, Lily Potter's 'defiance' consisted mainly of publicly condemning the violence of the Death Eaters and, of course, marrying the Pureblood James Potter despite her Muggleborn status. In any case, the Dark Lord was known to have spent decades traveling the world in his studies of the Dark Arts. I assumed that in his travels, he had crossed wands with a wizarding couple three times - foreign aurors perhaps - and that he killed one or both of them during their third encounter. The subject of the prophecy, then, was most likely their son or daughter who, having reached adulthood, now pursued the Dark Lord to seek vengeance. So no, the possibility of the prophecy referring to an unborn child simply did not occur to me ... until after I was initiated into the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord announced his plans to completely destroy St. Mungos on the morning of August 1st."

Harry's eyes rose. "You were the one who talked him out of it."

Snape nodded. "I along with two others. We persuaded the Dark Lord that murdering dozens of children and infants and possibly hundreds of other wizards and witches at the nation's only hospital would turn the opinion of a still-divided wizarding Britain against us. Indeed, without knowing the full prophecy, it was possible that the mysterious 'power to vanquish the Dark Lord' might refer to the symbolic power that the memory of a murdered child might have in shaping public opinion irrevocably against

him. It was a highly improbable interpretation, but it was just plausible enough to deter the Dark Lord from attacking St. Mungo's. Shortly thereafter, he focused his attention exclusively on you two and on Jim Potter, as all three of your were to be born at the end of July and, as far as the Dark Lord was concerned, all four of your parents had defied him three times. It was at that point that I contacted Dumbledore, urged him to send the Potters and Longbottoms into hiding, and agreed to spy on the Dark Lord on Dumbledore's behalf."

"Did you know that Barty Crouch Jr. was a Death Eater?" asked Neville. Only a slight tightening of his fingers around the arms of his chair alerted Harry to how nervous Neville was to ask the question.

"Not until his arrest. The Death Eaters worked in cells, wore voice-altering masks while doing the Dark Lord's work, and always used code names. I obtained a position as the Dark Lord's potions expert which meant I never went on raids and rarely interacted with Death Eaters on a personal level outside of those I already knew. Everyone whose identity I uncovered through spying I reported to Dumbledore. There is very little else I can say about that without contravening secrecy oaths I made to the Headmaster. And before you ask, Mr. Potter, no, I did not know that Sirius Black was a Death Eater either. In fact, I was quite astonished to learn of it. While I found him to be a despicable man, I had always believed Black to be an implacable foe of the Death Eaters."

"What was your code name?" asked Harry.

Snape suppressed a smirk. *Of course*, that would be the sort of cloak and dagger silliness that would intrigue the Slytherin Potter. "I was Mr. Aconite," he replied.

Harry nodded with a slight amusement. "Naturally." Then he looked over at Neville.

"That's all I have, sir," Longbottom said. "I appreciate your candor." The boy spoke easily, without either anger or guile. Snape blinked repeatedly.

"That's ... all, Mr. Longbottom?" he asked somewhat nonplussed.

Neville nodded. "You made a mistake, but after you realized it, you did what you could to make it better. And you never knew about my Cousin Barty, who was the only one who could have led the other Death Eaters through the Longbottom wards to attack my parents. None of what happened to my parents was your fault beyond the simple fact of Barty and the Lestranges knowing that You-Know-Who was interested in me, and you did what you could to fix that. I don't see any cause to bear ill will against you, sir."

Snape blinked some more before finally composing himself enough to speak. "Mr. Longbottom, you ... remind me very much of your father. I believe that is one of the highest compliments I am capable of giving."

"Thank you, sir," the boy replied softly.

"Um, I did have a few more questions," said Harry. "I'm not sure that you can answer them if you're under oaths, but if you don't mind, I'd still like to ask." Snape nodded. "The first one is about last Thursday. Did you or any of the other teachers know what all the traps were or how to disarm them?"

Snape was surprised at the change of topic and somewhat bemused at Harry's transition from wronged child to seasoned investigator. He remembered how the boy had

deduced the Dark Lord's involvement with Quirrell from a startlingly small number of clues, and he was once again curious as to the boy's thought processes.

"No. Each of us knew how to disarm only the traps we personally designed. The trapdoor in the room guarded by the Cerberus was actually a magical construct leading to Wizardspace." He noticed the boys' confusion.

"Wizardspace is a term of art relevant to spatial expansion and manipulation Charms. You will study it in Seventh Year if you pursue a Charms NEWT. Each professor designed the trap in an individual room of their own choosing which was then shrunk down to the size of a small box. When he was ready to prepare the gauntlet in its entirety, the Headmaster assembled the modular boxes and expanded them back again, which explains how you could have a trap door in the floor of a Third Floor room that does not connect to an opening in the ceiling of the adjacent Second Floor room."

"When were the individual traps completed and turned over to the Headmaster?"

"Most of them over the course of last summer, although the final room was not completed until December due to outside forces beyond our control." Snape noticed that Harry seemed surprised at that. "Why is this relevant, Mr. Potter?"

"I'm ... not sure anymore in light of your last answer, but my next question may help explain it. That is, if it's one you're permitted to answer. The plan, according to the Headmaster, was to lead Quirrell through a gauntlet of traps to both confuse him and lull him into a false sense of security, so that when he found the Mirror, You-Know-Who would be drawn into it and destroyed." Harry took a deep

breath. "To the best of your knowledge, was that really the *actual* plan?"

The question clearly confused Snape. "You've lost me, Potter. What other plan do you think there could have been?"

The boy took another even deeper breath before diving in headfirst. "I was thinking of, perhaps, a plan by the Headmaster to engineer a direct confrontation between You-Know-Who and Jim Potter so that the former could be destroyed completely by the latter's mysterious 'vanquishing' power."

Snape stared at the boy for several seconds as he thought through the implications of that statement. "Mr. Potter, I cannot imagine what you are talking about. No one could have anticipated the manner in which the Dark Lord would figure out our objective and Confund your brother and his friends into meeting him in the Mirror Room. Now tell me what it is you are thinking."

Harry stared at Snape as if trying to gauge his trustworthiness. Eventually, he decided that if he couldn't trust Snape at this point, there was literally no one over the age of eleven that he *could* trust, so he'd might as well go for it.

"Room One: A three-headed dog that falls asleep if you play music around it, a fact made known to Jim Potter by Rubeus Hagrid right around the time Hagrid gave Jim a flute as a Christmas present. Room Two: A Devil's Snare, which Neville identified merely by its scent even before entering the room and which he disabled easily. Room Three: An absurdly overcomplicated aerial trap which could only be overcome by someone with the specific skill set of a

talented Quidditch Seeker. Room Four: A giant chessboard which I am told Ron Weasley beat in just twelve moves. Room Five: A troll that Neville and Hermione had already helped incapacitate once before. Room Six: A logic puzzle that Hermione solved in less than a minute and a potion that only allowed one person to proceed to the final room at a time. Frankly, sir, it looks very much like the gauntlet was designed for the particular skills and specialties of Jim Potter and the three Gryffindors most likely to accompany him on his ... adventure."

Snape's face turned into an emotionless mask, which strangely reassured Harry more than if he'd registered shock instead. "With whom have you discussed this ... theory?"

"Blaise and Theo. We all noticed it while making our own way through the gauntlet. Hermione figured it out the next day once she was no longer under the Confundus and had time to think about things, and she told Neville. None of us have discussed it with Jim, Ron or anyone else." He did not mention that everyone who knew his theory had made their own independent plans for recovering the information in the event they were Obliviated.

Snape nodded. "Tell no one of this. I will ... investigate the matter. When you describe the situation as you have, I admit I find it troubling as well. That said, while the coincidence is startling, I know for a fact that Professor McGonagall submitted her room to the Headmaster weeks before the start of school at a time when no one knew that Weasley was a chess prodigy or even that Weasley and the Other Potter would strike up a friendship. Likewise, I submitted my own room around the same time before I even knew who Miss Granger was. Still, I will definitely look into this matter. Is there anything else?"

Harry grimaced. His last question might, he feared, be a bridge too far. "One final thing, sir. You mentioned earlier that you were very surprised at Sirius Black being a Death Eater. I know you have a history with the man and have as much reason to hate him as you do my father. That said ... is there any possibility – no matter how remote you might think it now – that Sirius Black is an innocent man?"

Five seconds later, Harry and Neville were out the door running as fast as they could for fear the irate Snape would hex them into the next century.

Chapter End Notes

AN: For those unhappy that the cliffhanger from the last chapter was not resolved in this one, I promise not to leave you hanging. The secret James Potter revealed to Dumbledore will be revealed (at least in part) next Monday in the finale to Year 1.

Also, some thoughts about Severus Snape: I had some concerns about this chapter because my version of Snape is, I think, the most OOC of any major character in the fic (although none of you have seen Lockhart yet.:)). To be perfectly honest, I think canon Snape is kind of an awful excuse for a human being, and if he hadn't been played by an actor as charismatic as Alan Rickman, I don't think anyone would have bought his heel-face turn for a second. In particular, I think it's kind of horrible that he only felt remorse over revealing the Prophecy to Voldemort after he learned that it likely applied to the son of literally the only person in the world he cared about. From what I know of canon-Snape, if Lily hadn't been pregnant, Snape would have happily stayed a Death Eater and never spied for Dumbledore.

Setting all that aside, however, I think the only clear explanation for Snape's actions and character in canon stem from the simple fact that Lily died despite all his efforts to save her. He foolishly drove her away in 1975, foolishly endangered her life in 1980, and failed to save her in 1981. Then, Dumbledore manipulated him into swearing an oath to protect her son - the son who looked exactly like his hated rival James. More importantly, Harry was the son who, arguably, was the real reason she died since Lily would not have been targeted if Harry had been born even a day later. I think that's also the reason why Snape was so hostile to Neville - if Neville had been the Boy-Who-Lived, Lily also might have survived.

In this story, however, Lily lived. More importantly, she lived and continued to hold a grudge against Snape for the next ten years despite his sacrifices on her behalf. And she raised one of her sons to be the same sort of James Potter clone that canon-Snape believed canon-Harry to be. And she sent her other son to be subjected to the same sort of abusive upbringing that ruined Snape's childhood. And yet, despite all that, Harry has somehow grown up to be the Slytherin wunderkind that Snape wishes he'd been. It was a big giveaway that in their very first interaction, Snape (who is notorious for his own greasy hair) basically orders Harry to improve his appearance. In Snape's head, Harry, Hermione and Jim are replaying the old Snape-Lily-James triangle, except this time, mini-Snape is charming, good-looking, popular and able to defend himself against bullies; mini-Lily has an extremely adversarial relationship with mini-James; and mini-James was so obnoxious from the first day of school that even his Head of House won't protect him from the consequences of his actions. If nothing else, it's highly unlikely that Harry is ever going to lose

his temper and call Hermione a "mudblood." As for Neville, now that Snape doesn't subconsciously view him as part of why Lily died, he can look at Neville objectively (and even with a tiny degree of fondness due to the interaction with Frank Longbottom that I invented for this chapter).

[1] The italicized section is taken from Chapter 28 ("Snape's Worst Memory") of Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.

The End of the Beginning Pt 1

Chapter 33: The End of the Beginning (Pt. 1)

20 June 1992

In the end, Slytherin won the House Cup by *forty* points. After discovering that Professor Snape was not in his rooms, Olivia Kolumbiko used her cheetah Patronus to send a message to Snape, McGonagall *and* Flitwick advising them that she had an important message from Harry Potter about a life-threatening emergency involving Professor Quirrell and "some stone" stored on the Third Floor. It was actually Flitwick who awarded her ten points for quick thinking and a creative use of an extremely difficult Charm. Harry made a point of not gloating or even looking at Jim as Dumbledore awarded the Cup to the Sytherins, which the Boy-Who-Lived thought was probably the nicest gesture Harry had ever made to him.

Hermione finished the year top-ranked among the firsties, as expected, though Neville topped her in Herbology and Harry narrowly did in DADA. In potions, she only beat out Lavender Brown by two points, which the other girl accepted with good humor even as she promised to study all summer long so she could beat Hermione in the fall. Among Slytherins, Harry finished at the top, followed by Blaise Zabini, Daphne Greengrass, and Draco Malfoy. Theo Nott had solid grades, and Crabbe and Goyle passed by a comfortable margin to the astonishment of them both. Jim barely snuck into the top ten in his class, with Ron quite a bit lower. Finally, early on the morning of the 20th, the students loaded onto the Hogwarts Express for the long journey home. For Harry, that meant the Dursleys, though

he'd been communicating with his solicitors for weeks and was actually looking forward to seeing his relatives again ... and their reaction to the changes that were forthcoming.

As his two sons were boarding the train for home, James Potter was hundreds of miles away, sitting in a stately office with a panoramic window view of Gringotts Bank and the London skyline beyond it. While Harry communicated with his solicitors through owls, James had both the time and money for a private consultation. The receptionist, a pretty young Beauxbatons graduate named Yvette, presented him with a tray of tea, watercress sandwiches and biscuits and politely asked "Lord Potter" to wait patiently for just a few minutes, as her employer was on an important floo call but would be in soon. Left to his own devices, James took in the expensive artwork on the walls and the antique desk in front of the window. He considered once again how well his friend had done for himself over the last decade, a success that was due in no small part James' own patronage. As he waited, James idly bit into a macaroon while thinking back to his last conversation with Dumbledore. The old man wasn't totally on board. He was still outraged by James' treatment of Harry, which was only fair since James was quite disgusted with it himself. But once James had revealed his secret to the Headmaster, Albus agreed to remain neutral in the Wizengamot, at least for the time being. He still insisted that he would reveal the Prophecy to Harry if and when he mastered Occlumency. James shuddered. He remembered his own Occlumency training at the Auror Academy. He'd reached third level (the minimum requirement for an auror) and stopped, unnerved by the way Occlumency affected his personality, and he was uncomfortable with Harry learning it, let alone Jim. Of course, he'd pretty much forfeited his right to forbid Harry

from studying the field at this point, but he hoped the boy wouldn't delve too far into mind magic.

Suddenly, the door opened, and a dignified man roughly James's age strode in. He'd lost a good bit of weight since the last time James had been here in person, but his elegant professional robes still fit well. James seemed to remember the man complaining about a new diet the healers had him on during their last floo call. It was obviously working - although still rather stout, the other man was down to only one chin. His face was leaner and his hair was so much better styled than the scraggly mullet he'd worn during their school days. He was by no means a handsome man, but the years had been relatively kind, and his wealth and success made up for his physical appearance, though even today, many people were still put off by that burning, rat-like gleam that his eyes always held.

"Good morning, James!" exclaimed Peter Pettigrew, Esq., Solicitor-At-Law, Order of Merlin (First Class), and Steward and Proxy for the House of Potter. "And what can I do for my favorite client today?"

Around four o'clock, the Express arrived at King's Cross. Hermione introduced her parents to Harry, Neville and several of the other members of the study group. Blaise introduced everyone to Gunther, a large and imposing man in traditional gray chauffeur's uniform (complete with knee-high boots and a cap) who, according to Blaise, "did things" for his mother. Draco also introduced Theo, Blaise and Harry to his father, Lucius Malfoy, who was every bit as cordial and sophisticated as Harry expected. There was only a brief instance when a look of ... distaste passed over his face, but Harry realized that it was not directed at any

of them but rather at a red-headed man some distance away who was obviously the patriarch of the Weasley family.

"I really need to figure out what that's all about at some point," Harry thought to himself. *"How the hell did these two families become such enemies."*

But then, Harry's own face darkened, as James Potter showed up to meet with the Weasleys and talk amiably with their family, his hand on Jim's shoulder the whole time. As he said his goodbyes to Draco and Theo, Harry ignored the tiny stab of jealousy and anger that still plagued him over the difference in how Lord Potter treated his two sons. Focusing on his friends, he promised to owl everyone and also got phone numbers from those friends who actually knew what a phone was. Everyone made tentative plans to go shopping for school supplies on the same day so that the group could meet up in Diagon Alley for dinner. Hermione actually wanted everyone to meet up in London at some point and take in a movie or a play, an idea that delighted the Muggleborns but clearly unnerved the more traditionally-raised children. Finally, Harry noticed two people off to the side (in slightly old-fashioned but still "normal" Muggle attire) who were waiting patiently for them: a brunette woman in her early-30's in a dark-blue pencil skirt and matching jacket and a slightly older man in a charcoal business suit with a cut appropriate to the 1940's. As the crowd thinned, the two walked over.

"Mr. Harry Potter, I presume?" said the woman. Harry nodded. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you face to face. I'm Hestia Jones, and this is Artemus Podmore."

"The pleasure's all mine," he said warmly as he shook both their hands. Hermione, Blaise and Neville were the only

friends still waiting around. "Guys, this is Miss Jones and Mr. Podmore, my solicitors."

"It's nice to meet you all," Podmore said with a warm smile. "However, Mr. Potter, we should head on now if we're to get to Gringott's before the end of normal business hours. Their rates double after seven o'clock."

"Dare I ask what you're doing at Gringott's," asked Hermione almost teasingly.

"Stuff," replied Harry with a wink.

"Slytherin stuff?" asked Neville.

Harry thought for a few seconds. "Maybe. Mainly, it's more like ... Potter stuff."

Neville laughed. "Give 'em hell, Harry." Then he picked up Harry into a bear hug. After followup hugs with the rest of his friends, Harry accompanied the two attorneys out of the station, carrying Hedwig in her cage (the rest of his luggage having already been magically conveyed to a vehicle outside). Harry never looked back towards James and so never saw the look of anguish that briefly flashed across his father's face.

Blaise followed the silent Gunther to a Rolls Royce parked near the station. As the chauffeur was loading the boy's trunk, a stylish woman with olive skin and jet-black hair stepped out of the vehicle to give the boy a hug and a kiss on the forehead. Then, Serena Zabini, her son and her driver got back into the Rolls and it pulled away.

"I want to hear all about your first year, *Passeroto*, but first things first. Are you still convinced Harry Potter is the one

we seek?" asked the Countess Zabini in her cultured Italian accent.

Blaise smiled at the woman who'd raised him. "Yes, *mamma*. I am quite certain of it."

"We shall see, *Passeroto*. I still wish to meet him. Meet him and read him."

"I know. I have told him you wish to meet with him, *mamma*, and he is amenable, though I said nothing of Divination. We will have time over the summer."

She nodded and smiled. "These are exciting times, *mio figlio*. We must be cautious ... and well-prepared."

Blaise nodded. As if there was any other way for a Zabini to go through life.

Lucius side-apparated Draco and Theo directly to the gates of Malfoy Manor. To Theo, it was quite impressive and yet, rather surprisingly, much more ... homey than he was expecting. The House of Nott was a gloomy place whose master had let it fall into disrepair, but Malfoy Manor was pristine, with walls as white as the cliffs of Dover, gleaming towers, and immaculately kept grounds populated by what appeared to be a flock of albino peacocks. It was a short walk up the drive to the manor's entrance. Along the way, Lucius asked both Draco and Theo questions about how their first year had gone. Once inside, Lucius pulled out a gold pocket watch and then turned to his son.

"It is half-past four, Draco, so I expect your mother will be in the conservatory with her harpsichord. Go and let her know that you have returned. I would speak with young Master Nott."

Draco nodded, gave Theo a reassuring look, and then left the foyer. Lucius studied Theo, who did his best not to show nervousness.

"I have known your father for many, many years, Master Nott. Did you know that?"

"Yes sir. My father has spoken of you many times."

"I also knew your mother, Master Nott. She was a fine woman. I was grieved to hear of her passing."

Theo swallowed. "Thank you, sir."

Lucius took a deep breath. "In this house, Master Nott, you will find a number of rooms which are warded shut. If you find a locked door, do not attempt to open it with magic. The House of Malfoy is home to a number of ... antiques, many of which are of magical character and some of which are quite dangerous if misused. You will not seek them out. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

"In the back of the house is the ophidiarium within which are housed a great many snakes, many of which are quite poisonous. There are also stables here on the grounds which house several Abraxan flying stallions. Abraxans are also quite dangerous to those not trained in handling them. They are also carnivorous – maneaters when they get the chance. You will not enter the ophidiarium nor will you visit the stables unless you in my company. Do you understand?"

Theo swallowed again. "Yes sir."

Then ... Lucius smiled. "If you obey those rules, Theodore Nott, then I promise you this." He bent down to look Theo

squarely in the eye. "You will be *safe* here. No matter what your father may have told you of me. No matter what you may think of me that I was once your father's ... associate. I swear on the honor of House Malfoy, that you will be *safe* from all harm while you are my guest."

Theo relaxed at that. "Thank you, sir. It is an honor to be a guest in your home."

Lucius nodded and then called out. "Prixie! Lemmy! Dobby! Mogli!" Four house elves popped into the foyer. Theo regarded them with some interest. Two looked like normal house elves. The third one – Dobby – seemed unusually anxious and fidgety. The fourth one – Mogli – was different from the other three and had an almost feral gleam in its eyes. It reminded Theo uncomfortably of his father's more ... *dangerous* house elves.

"Prixie, please escort Master Nott here to his rooms. He will be staying in the second East Wing guest room, across from Master Draco. Dobby, convey his baggage to that room. Lemmy, I would like to have dinner at seven o'clock. Something special to welcome our new guest." Lemmy curtsied and smiled at the thought of cooking something particularly exotic. Then, Lucius spoke more coldly to the fourth house elf. "Mogli, remain here. Master Theo, Prixie will show you to your room where you can refresh yourself before dinner."

Theo bowed respectfully and followed Prixie up the stairs as the other two elves popped away. Once the others were gone, Lucius stared balefully at Mogli. "Has your mistress given you any instructions regarding Theodore Nott, Mogli?"

The strange elf let out a soft growl from deep within its throat. "None ... *master*."

Lucius stared at his wife's favorite house elf, the one gifted to her by her Auntie Walburga as a wedding present. Technically, as head of the household, Mogli owed its loyalty to Lucius, but it was a slippery, foul little thing, and Lucius never trusted it. "If she gives you *any* instructions pertaining to Theo Nott, you will inform me immediately. You will not reveal to her that I have given you this instruction. Do you understand?"

"Yessss ... *master*," said Mogli, spitefully.

Lucius's jaw clenched. "If you fail to do so, Mogli, I will give you clothes no matter what your Mistress wants. And if any harm comes to Theo Nott while he is my guest due to your actions or inactions ... I will kill you. Do you understand?"

Fire flashed in Mogli's eyes for a brief second before he growled his acknowledgment. Lucius studied the house elf for a moment, as if trying to read its heart, before finally dismissing it.

Upstairs, Draco entered the conservatory to find his mother Narcissa playing a fugue on her harpsichord. It was a Muggle piece by someone named ... Bach or something. According to Narcissa, his musical genius was enough to compensate for his Muggle inferiority, and so playing his music was acceptable to the House of Black (and by extension to the House of Malfoy, as his father didn't care about music whatever its origin). By painful experience, Draco knew not to approach his mother or even to speak while she was playing, and so he waited patiently in the doorway.

"Come closer, Dragon," she finally said without looking up from the keyboard. Draco drew near but still did not speak.

"Your last letter to me was rather ... terse. Can I assume that there is more that you *would* tell me ... if you were able?"

Draco said nothing, and Narcissa sighed. "We will not speak of this again lest we tempt the wrath of Magic. I shall study this matter carefully before choosing a course of action. Yes, I shall definitely make a study of this ... Harry Potter." She continued playing for a few seconds before speaking again. "I must confess, my Dragon – I find myself ... disappointed."

Draco looked down at the ground. "I'm sorry, Mother," he said very softly. Finally, after a few more uncomfortable seconds, she finished the piece. Then, she turned to look at her son for the first time and then held out her arms to him. Draco rushed to embrace his mother.

"Shhh, my Dragon. It will be alright. Mummy will make it better. She always does."

A little after five o'clock, Harry found himself sitting between Hestia and Artemus ("Artie" to his friends and favored clients) in a luxurious and yet somehow menacing office on the top floor of Gringott's. On the opposite end of the long table was a goblin account manager who was talking angrily with a subordinate. Well, Harry *assumed* the goblin was angry. Everything in the goblin tongue sounded like incoherent rage to him. He'd been astonished to learn that the name of the goblin language really was "Gobbledegook." Apparently, it meant "noble tongue" to them, but first wizards and then Muggles adopted it as a loan word meaning "incomprehensible gibberish." Harry

shook his head. "*And wizards wonder why goblin revolts keep happening.*" Of course, the goblins weren't exactly known for their diplomacy either. Harry had looked into buying an educational potion so that he could learn Gobbledegook as a way to show respect, but Hestia and Artie had *strongly* recommended against it. First, such potions were illegal to sell in Britain under the most recent Goblin Treaty, as goblins didn't want wizards to understand what goblins were saying behind their backs. More importantly, Gobbledegook was such a nuanced language that it was trivially easy for a novice speaker to make an embarrassing faux pas or even a horrific insult out of a simple "hello." Hestia did suggest that if he wanted to learn it when he was older, the potion was available overseas. She recommended that he learn it but never let any goblin know about it so that he could listen in on what the goblins assumed were private conversations.

After several minutes, the goblin (whose name was Gottschalk) turned to the three wizards. "Based upon the information you have provided, we believe we have a match. However, we will need a blood sample for confirmation. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes," said Hestia, "provided that the sample is destroyed completely in the process." Gottschalk waved his hand dismissively as if only an idiot would have thought otherwise. Then, he gestured, and a long blank parchment appeared on the table in front of Harry along with a red quill pen. There was a line drawn at the bottom of the page for Harry to sign.

"You'll need to sign your full wizarding name, which is *Hadrian Remus Potter*," said Artie. "Also, don't bear down on the pen too much or you might cut yourself."

Harry signed as instructed, only slightly surprised by the faint itching sensation on his arm that tracked the trail of blood-red ink the pen left on the parchment. "Remus, huh? Let me guess – Jim's middle name is Romulus or something like that?"

"No idea, actually," replied Podmore. "I'll check if you want."

Harry shrugged. The question wasn't really important to him. As soon as he finished signing, the blood ink that the pen produced turned black, and then the ink spread quickly up the page forming a crude family tree. First Lily and Petunia Evans, then their mother and father who had both died before he was born, and then other names as the tree grew. Some he recognized, others he did not. About halfway up the page, the spreading ink paused, and then the next name to appear was not in black, but rather a vivid purple. Thinking back to Slytherin's tapestry, Harry was certain he recognized the surname.

"Huh," said Artie noncommittally. "Was not expecting that."

"Is it good news or bad?" Harry asked.

Arty opened his mouth, closed it again, and then considered the matter. "I guess it's what you make of it. It's ... potentially controversial, maybe even enough for James to make hay out of it, although that will be difficult since your mother and brother are also descendants. But there could be enormous potential as well. I'll have Gottschalk pull the family's asset list."

"Any other living heirs?"

"Possibly, but none that can contest your claim. The Wizengamot gave notice that the House was set for line

extinction a few years ago." He looked over at Harry.
"Obviously, that's about to change."

"When do we need to announce this to preserve my rights?
Do we have enough time for me to come of age first?"

"Oh yes. We have several years before we need to formally
announce anything officially. Plenty of time."

"Hmm. So what can we do with this in the
meantime *without* letting James or anyone else know about
it?" asked Harry.

"Oh, Harry," said Hestia with an almost predatory gleam in
her eye. "All sorts of interesting things." Harry smiled at
that.

The End of the Beginning Pt 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 34: The End of the Beginning (pt. 2)

POTTER MANOR. 7 PM.

Lily Potter apparated into the foyer of Potter Manor just before dinner, and after summoning a house elf to take away her trunks and other possessions, she made her way to the kitchen area. While Potter Manor had a full-sized dining room, it was far too big for just three people, and so the family usually ate their meals in the breakfast nook at a table just big enough for three. Actually, it was big enough for four, but Lily had spent ten years training herself to ignore that empty spot where the fourth chair should have gone. Dinner was already on the table: cottage pie, roasted potatoes and treacle tart for desert – all of Jim's favorites.

The three Potters made amiable chitchat as they ate, but Jim thought the tension in the room was suffocating. Questions about how his first year went, about the Quidditch team's prospects for next year, about what trips the family should take when James's vacation days arrived. Nothing about Harry. Nothing about Voldemort. Nothing about that smell on James's breath that Jim suspected was Scotch. But things didn't get really bad until James mentioned Uncle Pete.

"By the way, Lils. I saw Peter today. He sends his congratulations for finishing your first year as a Professor."

Lily paused with a spoon almost to her mouth as she looked up into James's eyes. "That's nice," she finally said in a tone suggesting that it wasn't nice at all. "Where did you bump into him?"

"Oh, you know," said James lamely, as if he suddenly regretted even mentioning Peter's name. "I had to drop by his office today to go over some ... legal matters. Nothing major."

"Um-hmm," said Lily before taking another sip of wine. Jim looked back and forth between his mother and father somewhat nervously. There had been tension between the two ever since they learned Harry was a wizard, but it seemed to have gotten exponentially worse since Christmas. The three ate in silence for a while before Lily spoke to him.

"So, Jim, what plans do you have for summer? You know, as soon as you've got your homework done," she said with a smile.

"Come on, Lils," laughed James. "Let the boy relax a little before you start in about his homework." Lily smiled at that, but there was a flash of ... something in her eyes.

"No, that's okay," said Jim hurriedly. "I do plan to get my homework done early. In fact ... I was wondering if it might be possible to, um, get some tutoring this summer? I didn't do as well in some classes as I wanted, and I want to do better next year."

James put his wine glass down and crooked an eyebrow at his youngest son. "Who are you and what have you done with Jim Potter?" he said jokingly.

"I'm serious," Jim said. James winced slightly at that remark for some reason, but the boy continued. "I asked Professor McGonagall, and she said that there's a form either of you can fill out and file with the Ministry that will allow you to oversee me practicing with a wand for up to twenty hours a month. Or someone else who is qualified and passes a background check if neither of you have the time for it. Anyway, whoever the teacher is casts a notification spell when my lessons start and when they end, and as long as the teacher stays in the room with me, it won't count as underage magic."

Lily's eyes narrowed. "Why have I never heard of this?"

"Well, honestly, most wizarding parents can't pass the background check because they don't have enough OWLS to be acceptable teachers. Also, it's ... kind of expensive. Five-hundred Galleons a month for the license and then twenty-five Galleons per hour of wand-training time, plus the costs for the instructor if you want to hire someone else to teach me."

James nearly choked on his wine. "What?! That's insane! You could buy Firebolts for your whole team for that!"

"Dad, we're rich! We can afford it! And frankly, I think spending money to further my education is more important than Quidditch!"

While James was processing that seemingly impossible concept, Lily stepped in. "What would you want to study?"

"Charms, Potions ..." he hesitated. "Defense. I need to do better at all those, but mainly Defense." Both of his parents tried to say something, but he continued speaking over them. "And not just magical defense, Mom. I want to start back with Taekwondo again, and I want to actually get good

at it. If that means doubling up my lessons with Master Hanaro, that's okay with me."

"Jim," said his father quietly, "is this about what happened with Quirrell?"

The boy just looked at his father. He felt a brief impulse to laugh hysterically but fought it down. "Yes, Dad, *of course*, it's about what happened with Quirrell! I spent thirty minutes tied up on the floor at the man's feet waiting to see if he was going to kill me first or make me watch one of my classmates die instead! And the only reason we *didn't* all die is because *three Slytherins* came to save us!" The boy looked down at the table and tried to calm himself. "The Boy-Who-Lived can't be ... *useless*."

"You weren't useless, Jim," said James. "Your power protected you, just like before. It always will."

"*You don't KNOW that!*" Jim snapped in frustration. "None of us know how this power works! Or how often I can use it! Or even what it is! Just that it protects me from Voldemort," both his parents flinched, "but it apparently puts me into a coma afterwards. And it didn't do *a thing* to protect me from Quirrell's Incarcerous or his Confundus, so I don't see why it would protect me from a Killing Curse from anyone who's *not* Voldemort! And another thing," he said quickly before his parents could interrupt, "since I already mentioned that I'm vulnerable to the Confundus Curse ... I want to learn Occlumency."

At that, both his parents exploded.

"No!" exclaimed James. "Absolutely not!"

"Jim, you are too young to start learning Occlumency. It can have very serious consequences to your mental health."

"Worse consequences than being mind-controlled by a dark wizard?! Harry's been studying it for months, and it hasn't done anything to him! Or is Occlumency some Slytherin thing that I should hate on principle but you just haven't mentioned it yet?"

"Jim! You will not use that tone with your mother and me, do you understand me?"

Jim sat back in his chair and sighed. "Yes sir," he said dejectedly. "So ... what *can* I learn this summer?"

James hesitated and looked over at Lily. "Let your mother and I talk about that. We'll let you know tomorrow, okay?"

"I shouldn't even go to Hogwarts if I can't defend myself and my friends," Jim thought to himself miserably. *"I'd rather be home-schooled than be a danger to everyone around me."* He rubbed his eyes and pushed his half-full plate away. "May I be excused? I'm not very hungry tonight."

His parents both nodded, and the boy got up and left the room. They waited in silence until the sound of his footsteps receded. Then, James turned to his wife. "Well, what do you think? Personally, I'd rather he relax and decompress after everything that happened this year, but ... do you think he needs ... combat training?"

Lily laughed almost bitterly. "Really, James? You're asking me that now? You know perfectly well that I've wanted him to have combat training since he was six, but you've always fought me on it. Honestly, my only objection to Jim learning *Occlumency* is that he's been so immature and short-tempered. If he buckles down in his studies and makes progress with his martial arts training and shows

some real self-discipline, then yes, I think he should start learning that too."

"He's *eleven!*"

"*I don't care how old he is, James!* I want Jim to have *every* advantage he can possibly get! I want him to *live!* Is that too hard for you to understand!"

"Shhh! Keep it down!" hissed James. He stepped past her into the next room, but it was empty. He listened for a second but heard nothing. Then, he walked back to Lily and took her arms in his hands. "Lily-flower, please. I know you're upset, but *of course* I want Jim to live. And I know he *is* going to live. The prophecy..."

She jerked her hands free of his and stepped away from him in annoyance. "James, nothing in that damned prophecy says that Jim is going to survive. It says he has the power to vanquish You-Know-Who but doesn't say he will. It says he has a power the Dark Lord knows not, but doesn't hint as to what it is. It says neither can live while the other survives, and we both know what that means: Jim and You-Know-Who *must* have a final confrontation in which one of them kills the other, but there is no guarantee that Jim will be the victor. *I don't want Jim going into that confrontation putting all his hopes into some vague hidden power!*"

"Do you seriously think that Jim could ever beat the Dark Lord with any amount of training, Lily?" said James angrily. "We either figure out what Jim's special power is ... or we accept that Voldemort's going to win. And I can't do that. I can't ... I can't accept losing my son." His voice broke and he turned away to pace the small room, while Lily looked at him with her arms folded.

"You have *two* sons, remember?" she said coolly. James whirled back towards her, his eyes flashing angrily.

"You think I don't know that?! It was *your* idea to send him to Petunia, not mine. I wanted to raise Harry and Jim together. I didn't care if he was a squib or not."

"That's rubbish, James. You just completely refused to consider that he even *might* be a squib. And what would you have done if he actually *had* been a squib? Or worse, as Albus feared, if he'd been a squib *because Jim drained his magic to defeat You-Know-Who?* How could any of us have lived with that knowledge, especially since, if it happened again, Jim might drain Harry of his very life? We couldn't have raised Harry in that environment. We'd have broken him, just like Algie Longbottom nearly broke Neville."

"*Never!* Whether Harry was a squib or not, I would never have given up on him the way you did if you and Dumbledore hadn't talked me into it."

SLAP!

James staggered back under the force of Lily's blow. "How dare you!" she hissed furiously. "How dare you say that I gave up on Harry!"

"What else would you call abandoning him to Petunia and Vernon?"

She stuck out her chin defiantly. "I call it doing whatever it took to help my son *survive!* Do you want to know the truth, James? When Albus said that Harry was a squib, part of me *was thrilled!* Thrilled because it meant that whatever happened between Jim and Voldemort, at least *Harry would be safe!* Be safe and well away from this ... this *madhouse* we call *Wizarding Britain!*"

James stared at her in astonishment for several seconds.
"I'm sorry. I must have missed the part where you suddenly hated magic. Maybe that's where Petunia gets it from. Does Dumbledore know his Muggle Studies professor is bigoted against magical culture?"

"Spare me your sanctimony, James. Or have you forgotten how my parents died thirteen years ago?"

"My parents died that year too, Lily."

"Your parents died instantly from the Killing Curse, James. *My* parents were..." The words caught in Lily's throat as she suddenly fought back tears,
"were *tortured* for hours and then *burned alive!* Burned up along with the house Petunia and I grew up in! And *why?*" Her voice broke as the tears finally came. "Because they raised a *filthy Mudblood daughter who married above her station!* THAT'S the Wizarding World I wanted Harry out of!"

James slowly moved to embrace his wife, his own face a mask of pain just like hers. But she stopped him with her hand while she composed herself. "No! No, none of that matters now. You were right, and I was wrong. Harry wasn't a squib and should never have been sent away for that reason. He's a part of the this world now, and we need to deal with that fact."

Then, she pierced James with a firm gaze. "So what are we going to do about him *now*, James? Harry may be a wizard, but he's also a Slytherin, which you seem to think is worse than being a squib. I've been avoiding him all year because I think it's pointless and even cruel to pretend that we can be one big happy family again while you obviously hate him for his Sorting. Just as he justifiably hates us for sending

him away for ten years. And honestly, it would be safest for him if he stayed away from us forever rather than come back and be caught in the crossfire when You-Know-Who returns." She paused to collect her thoughts before looking back up at James. "Anyway, I *know* you took the whole day off from work even though you didn't have to pick up Jim until four o'clock. Am I right in thinking you spent most of it with Peter brainstorming on how to kick Harry out of our family for good?"

James looked shame-faced and leaned heavily against the table. "Actually ... Peter basically told me ... that I should give up on trying to disinherit Harry. There's no legal way to do it at this point. I mean ... if he flunks his OWLS or, I dunno, *murders* someone, it's possible. But neither of those seem too likely, so Pete says I should just accept this for now." He looked back up at Lily. "Maybe even try to develop some sort of relationship with him."

Lily came close to James and put her hand on his shoulder. "Do you mean it? And do you think it's even possible after everything that's happened?"

"I don't know, Lily-flower," he said tiredly. "But I think I'm going to try."

Lily smiled. Then, she kissed his cheek and moved in for a tight hug. James hugged his wife back as if afraid she'd disappear, but the love he felt for her couldn't overcome the icy fear that gripped his heart.

DIAGON ALLEY. 3:30 PM (EARLIER THAT DAY)

"James, we have been over this and over this," said Peter who had spent hours arguing with James to no avail. It was a good thing they were billable hours. "I warned you from

the start that it would be nearly impossible to disinherit Harry unless the boy actually did something listed as grounds within the Inheritance Act of 1588. Well, he's only eleven. He's not going to commit a Class AAA felony. He's not going to get some Muggle girl pregnant out of wedlock. From what you've said, it seems unlikely he's going to flunk out of Hogwarts. And I doubt seriously that he's going to swear *fealty to the King of Spain!*"

James groaned and put his head into his hands. They'd been arguing all morning about various options. Peter pointedly reminded James that his obstinate refusal to tell Peter why he wanted to disinherit his Heir Presumptive made things even more difficult. "What has the boy done to you to provoke this reaction? Is it just the Slytherin thing? Or is it that you think the Boy-Who-Lived is more deserving of inheriting your fortune than the one you thought was a squib?"

"Jim being the Boy-Who-Lived has nothing to do with this, Peter. And I don't give a damn about the fortune. Hell, I'd give Harry every last knut in my vault if he'd just give up the Potter name! But I *cannot* have a Slytherin heir and that's all there is to it!"

Peter stared at James in complete astonishment. "Do you really mean that? You'd bankrupt your family just to cast Harry out of it? And just because of his Sorting?! I don't understand."

"And I don't need you to understand, Peter," snapped James irritably. "I just need you to make it happen."

Peter's eyes narrowed. Then, he smiled. "Alright, James. Here is my official legal advice. Make peace with the boy. Abandon all efforts to disinherit him. If possible, get the boy

to move back in with you and Lily during the summers. Surrender." He held up a hand, as James started to object. "*For now*. Honestly, I think your biggest problem in dealing with Harry is that you really don't know anything about your own son. What makes him tick. What he wants out of life. What his hopes and fears are. So bury the hatchet and try to establish a rapport. When he turns fifteen, he'll be entitled to the Heir Apparent's stipend, which is a comfortable lifestyle but not filthy rich by any means. He won't come into his full inheritance and the benefits of Lordship until you're dead, which might be sixty or seventy years if you take care of yourself. So *maybe*, if you and he are getting along by the time he turns fifteen, you can turn his Slytherin nature to your advantage and persuade him to leave the family in exchange for a hefty lump sum payment." Peter paused, and his eyes gleamed a little bit more. "And if not, maybe closer proximity will show you which buttons to push to get him to do something for which you *can* legally disinherit him. Certainly, it's a better idea than anything else we've tried."

James sighed. "And if that doesn't work?"

Peter smirked unpleasantly, and that ratlike gleam in his eyes practically burned. "If no legal process has worked by the time the boy's of age, then I'll simply have to look into ... alternative approaches."

James stiffened. "Like what?"

Peter's smile abruptly dropped away. "Like things you won't be told about before I do them so that Lord Potter can have clean hands," he snapped. "You've been trying to disinherit the son you abandoned for nearly ten years, James, and we're nearly to the point where plausible deniability may be necessary for any future efforts. And if we do reach that

point, you will let me do my job and not ask me any unpleasant questions about how the sausage gets made." The gleam intensified to the point that James had to look away from his old friend, just as a week before he could barely maintain eye contact with Albus Dumbledore. But in that case, the old man's gaze filled him with shame for failing to live up to Gryffindor ideals. Peter's gaze filled him with a different shame, one that made him feel dirty and low and unworthy to have ever been Sorted into Gryffindor in the first place.

Then, a clock on the fireplace mantle chimed, and the solicitor sighed and relaxed. "Anyway, you'd better head on now, James, if you want to pick Jim up at the station." Then, he perked up and snapped his fingers. "But I almost forgot – before you go, stop in with Yvette. She has some papers for you to sign. Some diversification plans for your portfolio. You may need to increase your liquidity if you end up having to bribe the boy into submission."

James stood slowly and shook Peter's hand. "Thanks, Pete. I'm ... sorry I snapped earlier. I really do appreciate all your help with this."

"Think nothing of it, James. That's what friends are for. Now, you go home and look after your wife and son. You just leave Harry Potter to me." Then, Peter smiled broadly, which James always found disturbing on account of how unusually sharp his friend's teeth were.

POTTER MANOR. 8 PM.

Both exhausted from their argument, James and Lily left the kitchen and headed up the stairs. A moment later, there was a flourish of motion, as Jim Potter, who had been

standing and eavesdropping in the next room, dropped his Invisibility cloak and grabbed the edge of a chair as his knees nearly buckled. "*The power the Dark Lord knows not,*" the prophecy said. "*Neither can live while the other survives,*" the prophecy said. His mother was desperate to get him whatever training she could because she had no faith in the mysterious "hidden power" alluded to in the prophecy. His father, on the other hand, had so much faith in the prophecy that he didn't see the need for any additional training at all. But both of them agreed on one point – if Jim Potter could not defeat Voldemort, then Voldemort would win and Jim would die, along with his parents, his friends, and everyone he cared about, and his entire world would be plunged into darkness and fire. As the enormity of his burden struck home, Jim slowly slid down the wall he'd been leaning against and fought the urge to sob.

4 PRIVET DRIVE. 9 PM.

After completing their business at Gringotts, Harry, Hestia and Artie celebrated with a nice meal at Summerisle's before driving out to Surrey. They arrived at 4 Privet Drive just after nine o'clock. Artie knocked sharply on the door, which was opened by what appeared to be an anthropomorphic pig wearing baggy sweatpants and an ill-fitting "SMELTINGS" T-shirt. Dudley Dursley looked at the three for a long while before yelling over his shoulder. "MOM! DAD! THE FREAK'S BACK! AND HE'S GOT TWO OTHER FREAKS WITH HIM!"

"Charming," muttered Artie.

"Oh, you have no idea," replied Harry as he pushed his way past Dudley and led the other two into the house. "Good

evening, Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon. I'd like to introduce some people to you. These are my solicitors: Artemus Podmore and Hestia Jones. They have some legal matters they'd like to discuss with you."

"What's the meaning of this!?" blustered Vernon. "Are they FREAKS like you, boy!?"

Harry looked at his uncle with obvious disgust. "Yes, Uncle Vernon. They're both freaks like me. Except that these freaks are fully grown wizards who know a lot more magic than me and who have the legal right to use it. So I wouldn't use that word again because you might end up on all fours squealing like a pig." Vernon paled, while Dudley whimpered in fear. Apparently, at some point over the last year, Vernon and Petunia had explained to their son what sorts of things an angry wizard could do to a Muggle who had drawn his wrath.

Minutes later, after sending Dudley upstairs, Vernon and Petunia sat down across the kitchen table from the three wizards as Hestia and Artie explained "how it's going to be." Harry's room was Harry's room. They would be making some modifications to it for security purposes but nothing that should have any impact on the Dursleys. Muggles would be in over the next week to install separate phone and cable TV lines for the boy's room which he would pay for himself. He would also get a mini-fridge, a hotplate and a microwave and be responsible for his own meals. After that, a door would be put into the exterior wall of Harry's room with magic, along with a set of stairs leading down to the back yard so that he could come and go without disturbing them. These would be concealed from Muggle eyes by magic and removed when Harry eventually moved out. In the meantime, the Dursleys wouldn't even know he was there except for when he came out of his room to take

a shower or use the toilet. Starting in July, he would be gone every Saturday for tutoring with a wand-certified instructor and also be gone every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon for tutoring in other courses (which included Occlumency, financial management and even flying lessons, though the wizards didn't bother to share those irrelevant details). He had tentative plans to leave and visit friends over the summer, and as a courtesy, he would notify the Dursleys when he'd be gone for any extended time.

Most importantly, Harry would do no chores and be subject to no discipline from Vernon, let alone bullying from Dudley and his friends. On this issue, Hestia abandoned any pretense of deference to the Dursley's feelings. While wizards had no monarchy, they did have an aristocracy of sorts, and Harry was a son of it. And if he were deliberately harmed while in the Dursley's "care" and it were reported to the right Ministry officials, there would be no official sanction... because those officials wouldn't waste the effort of legal due process on Muggles who assaulted wizards of Harry's status. Instead, some people would probably just come for them in the night, and by the time the sun rose, none of their friends, neighbors or coworkers would even remember that anyone named Dursley had ever lived at 4 Privet Drive.

With that, Harry led the two solicitors up to his room where they made a few technical notes about the changes to his room. Then, they produced a bill for him to sign in order to pay for the modifications as well as for their legal work to date. Harry was happy to pay – thanks to Hestia and Artie, he now had a second and rather sizeable trust vault, one which he could access relatively freely and about which James Potter knew nothing. The two solicitors left, and Harry unpacked his trunk and placed Hedwig's cage on the

hook next to the window. Then, he plopped down onto his bed and sighed happily. It was going to be a great summer.

Downstairs, as Hestia was leaving, she made eye contact with Vernon and Petunia and shuddered. The *look* they were giving her was unsettling. She decided that tomorrow, she'd talk with Artie about whether any additional security measures were needed. As the witch closed the door behind her, Petunia threw herself into Vernon's arms and started weeping.

"Shh, Pet," said Vernon soothingly. "It'll be alright."

"But they were in our house, Vernon. And the things they said! Us just disappearing in the night like that.

Vernon held his wife close and rubbed her back soothingly. "They said that he'll keep the freakishness away from us. That we'll hardly know the boy is here. That's ... that's got to be an improvement, right?"

"But what if he doesn't? What if ... what if the boy ... gets *worse*?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

Vernon turned and looked up, as if he could peer through the ceiling to the boy's room and see him sitting there, mocking them both, leering at them with his wicked green eyes. Vernon's mouth twitched nervously.

"If it gets worse?" Vernon repeated in a low mean voice, one that promised to protect his family from their unwanted and unnatural intruder, no matter what the cost. "Well, then, the Freak will have to sleep sometime, won't he?"

POTTER MANOR. 3 AM.

James stared at the ceiling of the darkened bedroom for hours until he could stand it no longer. Carefully, he got out of bed without waking Lily and made his way down the hall to his private office. Once inside, he locked the door with his strongest privacy spell and poured himself another glass of Scotch. There was a part of him that knew perfectly well that alcohol never solved anything. There was another part, however, that believed that alcohol was as good a response as any when there were no solutions to be had. He sat there for quite a while, sipping his Scotch and staring out the window as the full moon shown down upon him. Idly, he wondered where Remus was, and whether he was happy or safe or even alive. It had been a long ten years, after all. Shaking off the memory of his former friend, he rose and walked over to the cold fireplace where the Potter coat of arms stood above the mantle. Placing his hand on it, he recited his family's motto.

"Vigilamus Pro Te."

The ancient motto tasted bitter in his mouth. "*We stand on guard for thee*" was the English translation, but it rather seemed that he'd failed on that regard having fallen asleep at his post in the worst possible way. He felt a soft vibration in his hand, and then the coat of arms slid aside to reveal a compartment that would not have existed in the material world had anyone not of Potter blood tried to open it. Inside were various legal papers, about ten-thousand galleons in an expanding bag, his late father's wand ... and a glass orb which he picked up and carried over to his father's desk. (To James, it would never truly be *his* desk. It would always belong to Charlus Potter.)

Still holding a glass of Scotch in one hand, James sat and tapped the orb with his wand. The phantasmal form of a woman appeared over it, the seeress Trelawney reciting

that wretched prophecy he'd heard so many times before. How he *hated* the name Trelawney! As James listened to the woman's voice, he thought back over his life – or more accurately, over *Harry's* life – and the mistakes he'd made that had brought him and his family and his world to this point. He remembered holding little Harry in his arms and weeping uncontrollably when Dumbledore and the doctors said he would be a squib and that it might possibly have been something Jim did to defeat Voldemort that *made* him a squib. That was his first mistake. He should have demanded to keep Harry in the family, no matter what the cost. Lily was right – it might have broken Harry to be a squib raised in the Potter House alongside with the Boy-Who-Maybe-Stole-His-Magic. Possibly, it might have even killed the boy if some future attack caused Jim to drain Harry's very life away once he had no more magic to give. But James would have raised Harry *right*, and his Heir would have hated the Slytherins – the way a Potter should have.

He remembered the elation he felt when he learned that Harry was a wizard after all, followed by the horror of realizing how the Dursleys had treated him, and then the heartbreak of Harry telling him to his face that he wished that James had been a Muggle drug addict dead of a car crash. That was his second mistake. He should have snatched Harry away from the Dursleys that day, taken him home and *begged and pleaded* for forgiveness. If nothing else, he'd have had a month to persuade Harry to fear and distrust the Slytherins – the way a Potter should have.

He remembered receiving the news from Jim about Harry's Sorting and then getting blind-stinking drunk. And far, far worse, sending the boy *a Howler* while blind-stinking drunk. He didn't even fully appreciate what he'd done until Lily's own Howler screamed at him while he was at the Auror's

Office still recovering from his hangover. He remembered the twisting knots in his stomach as he recalled the awful things he'd said. Remembered how he'd completely annihilated any possibility of bringing Harry back into the family. Remembered how he'd ruined *everything*. All of those things passed through his mind as he downed his Scotch and listened to the final closing lines of the Trelawney Prophecy.

*The **first** Trelawney Prophecy.*

Not the one made in 1980 by that drunken fraud Sybil Trelawney which heralded Jim Potter as the Defeater of Voldemort. No, this was the much *earlier* prophecy made by the celebrated Lady *Cassandra* Trelawney to Lord Nathaniel Potter in 1780. The prophecy that had guided the Potter family for ten generations as a sacred family trust. The prophecy that now was nothing but a cruel testament to James's failures as a wizard, as a father, and as the Lord of his House.

**And you shall know by these portents that the Time
of the Dark God approaches**
and the Destruction of our World is close at hand:
When the Two who should be as One are set against each
other in reckless hate,
and the Last Potter rises as the Prince of Slytherin.

**TO BE CONTINUED IN
"HARRY POTTER AND THE SECRET ENEMY"**

Chapter End Notes

WOW! Five months. Over 110,000 words. Over 800 reviews and favorites. Over 1000 followers. And we're

just getting started! Thanks so much to all of you who have shown your appreciation for this story. Your encouragement has kept me going through some pretty difficult patches.

Incidentally, the first chapter of HP&TSE is tentatively called "Summer School," and the last two words of the chapter are "Vernon smiled."

RE Why Lily Potter has been acting this way: Imagine that the year after Death Eaters tortured your parents to death, you had twin sons. One of them, according to the best medical evidence available, was a squib. The other is the Chosen One who single-handedly defeated Voldemort, but in the process may have drained the first twin of his magic and possibly may drain the first twin to death if Voldemort returns, which is apparently likely to happen. What steps would you take to protect the squib child?

RE Why James Potter has been acting this way: Imagine that you are Lord Nathaniel Potter and the most celebrated seeress of the day makes a prophecy to you about your family, one which states (among other things not yet revealed):

- (1) that someday a Potter will be sorted into Slytherin and rise to some mysterious yet important position within it,
- (2) that said Potter will also be the Last Potter, and
- (3) that said Last Potter will be the herald of some apocalyptic event that involves a "Dark God."

What steps would you take to avert or at least delay the prophecy from coming to pass? Might you consider raising your children and your children's children and all their descendents to fear and hate Slytherins from

early childhood, so that for generations to come, Potter children go under the Sorting Hat saying "Please not Slytherin! Anything but Slytherin!" And what if this works pretty well until one day, a Potter child is mistakenly identified as a squib and sent away to abusive Muggle relatives where, as Snape put it, only Slytherin values would help him survive? Yes, from Harry's perspective, James has been an awful father. From James's own perspective, however, he's basically having a breakdown over the possibility that his firstborn son might be the Wizarding Antichrist.

RE The family lineage of Harry, Jim and Lily: Nope. Sorry. That's something Harry will be keeping in his back pocket until he absolutely needs to pull it out. And I know the exact minute when he will need to pull it out. And it will be awesome. There may be hints, but it won't be officially revealed for a while. (One mini-spoiler: It's not the Gaunts, for whichever reviewer predicted that.)

If you really enjoyed this, join us on the Prince of Slytherin Discord Server which you can find [here](#)!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!